Oobi! The Final Adventure

Oobi! The Final Adventure

Tab 2

Oobi! The Final Adventure is a heartfelt and imaginative journey that brings the beloved hand-puppet world to its most mysterious chapter yet. When small, unexplainable changes begin to creep into Oobi's world-missing sounds, fading colors, and moments that seem to repeat just a little too differently-something feels... off.

Determined to understand what's happening, Oobi and his friends set out on a journey beyond the places they've ever known. Along the way, they encounter strange clues, forgotten paths, and a quiet presence that always seems just out of sight, as if the world itself is hiding a secret it isn't ready to share.

But the deeper they go, the more Oobi begins to wonder: is this something that can be fixed... or something that was always meant to happen?

Blending warmth, humor, and a gentle sense of mystery, Oobi! The Final Adventure explores friendship, change, and the unknown. As the story unfolds, Oobi discovers that not every question has a clear answer-but sometimes, the bravest thing you can do is keep going anyway, even when the ending hasn't been written yet.

Sainey© All Rights Reserved

Tab 3

Chapter One: The Day the World Blinked

Morning in Oobi's world usually arrived like a giggle—soft, bright, and a little bouncy. The sky stretched awake in gentle colors, and the floor beneath everything felt like a quiet promise that the day would be friendly.

But today... something blinked.

Not a big blink. Not a thunderclap or a crash or a dramatic *whoosh*. Just a tiny, almost invisible flicker, like the world had forgotten what it was doing for a split second and then hurried to pretend nothing happened.

Oobi didn't notice it at first.

He was busy.

Very busy.

"Play?" Oobi said to himself, popping up from behind the edge of the table with his usual cheerful energy. His little eyes widened with excitement. Today felt like a good day for something fun. Maybe a game. Maybe a story. Maybe both.

He wiggled with anticipation.

"Uma! Kako! Play!"

From across the room, **Uma** bounced into view, full of sparkle and ideas as always. "Oobi! I have a game!" she said, her voice bright like a bell. "It's called... *Treasure Surprise Adventure Game!*"

Oobi gasped in delight. "Treasure!"

A moment later, **Kako** appeared too, a little more thoughtful, a little more careful, but just as excited deep down. "What kind of treasure?" he asked, tilting slightly as if examining the very idea.

Uma spread her fingers wide like a grand magician revealing a trick. "A mystery treasure! We follow clues, and at the end—surprise!"

Oobi clapped. "Clues! Surprise! Yay!"

Everything felt normal.

Perfect, even.

They gathered in their usual spot, the cozy center of their little world, where games were invented and laughter seemed to live. Uma began arranging imaginary clues with great seriousness, pointing to places only she could see.

"First clue is... over there!" she declared.

Oobi and Kako leaned in.

But before they could move—

The world blinked again.

This time, Oobi felt it.

It was like a hiccup in the air. A tiny stutter. A moment where everything paused just long enough to feel strange... and then kept going.

Oobi froze.

"...Oobi?" Uma said, noticing his stillness. "You okay?"

Oobi looked around.

Everything looked the same.

The same room. The same light. The same friends.

But something felt... not-same.

"Feel funny," Oobi said quietly.

Kako tilted again, more seriously this time. "Funny how?"

Oobi searched for the right word, his little eyes drifting across the space as if the answer might be hiding there.

"...Like... gone."

"Gone?" Uma repeated, her brightness dimming just a notch.

Oobi pointed vaguely behind them. "Was... something."

They all turned.

Nothing was there.

Just empty space where empty space had always been.

Kako frowned—well, as much as he could. "Maybe you imagined it."

Oobi hesitated.

Maybe.

Oobi imagined things all the time. That was normal. Good, even.

But this didn't feel like imagining.

This felt like remembering something that wasn't allowed to stay remembered.

Before Oobi could say more, Uma clapped her hands. "Okay! Clue time! First clue says... 'Look where the quiet hums!'"

"The quiet hums?" Kako repeated. "That doesn't make sense."

"It's a mystery!" Uma said proudly.

Oobi smiled again, trying to shake the strange feeling loose. "Find hum!"

They began their search.

Behind the table—nothing.

Near the corner—nothing.

Under the imaginary blanket of "maybe treasure lives here"—still nothing.

But as they searched, little things began to feel... off.

Not big things.

Small things.

Tiny things.

The kind of things you only notice if you stop and listen very carefully.

The usual soft background "hum" of their world—the gentle, comforting feeling that everything was *there*—seemed quieter.

Too quiet.

Kako paused mid-search. "Do you hear that?"

Uma blinked. "Hear what?"

"...Nothing," Kako said slowly.

Oobi looked at him. "Nothing?"

Kako nodded. "Usually there's... something. I don't know what. But now it's..." He searched for the word. "...less."

Oobi's eyes widened.

Less.

Yes.

That was it.

Before Uma could respond, something strange happened.

One of her "imaginary clues"—a bright, enthusiastic point she had made just moments ago—simply... wasn't there anymore.

She turned back to where she had pointed.

"...Wait," she said.

Oobi and Kako followed her gaze.

"The clue was right there," Uma said, her voice smaller now. "I made it. I remember making it."

Kako looked carefully. "There's nothing there."

Uma shook her head. "No, no, it was there! It was the first clue! It said—"

She stopped.

Her expression changed.

"...I don't remember what it said."

Silence settled in, soft but heavy.

Oobi felt that strange feeling again.

Like something had slipped through his fingers... even though he didn't know what he had been holding.

"Game... broken?" Oobi asked.

Uma didn't answer right away.

She looked around, as if expecting the answer to jump out from somewhere familiar.

But nothing did.

"...Maybe we just make a new clue!" she said suddenly, forcing her brightness back into place. "Yeah! New clue! Even better!"

Kako hesitated. "Are you sure?"

"Yep!" Uma said quickly. "It's still fun!"

Oobi smiled a little, but it didn't quite reach all the way.

"Fun..." he repeated softly.

They tried again.

A new clue.

A new direction.

A new start.

But as they moved, the world blinked a third time.

Longer.

Noticeable.

The light dimmed for just a fraction of a second, like a candle almost going out before catching itself again.

And in that tiny flicker—

Oobi thought he saw something.

Not a shape.

Not a person.

Just a... *space* where something might be.

Watching.

Waiting.

Gone the instant he tried to focus.

Oobi gasped.

"See!" he said, pointing.

"See what?" Uma asked, turning quickly.

"Right there!"

But of course...

There was nothing.

Kako stepped closer to Oobi. "You keep seeing things."

Oobi lowered his hand slowly.

"...Not things," he said.

Another pause.

Then, quieter:

"...missing things."

That word seemed to echo, even though nothing in their world was supposed to echo.

Missing.

Uma hugged her fingers close, just for a second.

Then she shook it off again. "Okay! New plan! No more clues. We just play something else!"

"Play..." Oobi said.

But he didn't move.

He was listening.

Not to a sound.

But to the *lack* of one.

And somewhere, deep in that quiet...

Something was taking pieces.

Not loudly.

Not quickly.

Just... little by little.

Like a story being erased one word at a time.

Oobi looked at his friends.

Then at the space around them.

Then at the place where he thought he had seen that almost-something.

"...Hello?" Oobi called softly.

No answer.

Of course.

But the quiet felt different after he said it.

Like something had heard him.

And didn't want to be found.

The day continued.

The game continued.

The laughter even came back, in small, careful pieces.

But underneath it all, like a secret written in invisible ink...

The world had blinked.

And somewhere in that blink,

something had begun.

Tab 4

Chapter Two: The Basement That Wasn't There Yesterday

The day didn't feel like a day anymore.

It felt like a question.

Oobi noticed it first when he tried to laugh.

"Ha!" he said.

But the laugh came out smaller than usual, like it had forgotten how big it was supposed to be.

Uma and Kako were trying to keep the games going, stitching fun together like a patchwork blanket. But the blanket had holes now. Tiny ones. Easy to ignore... until you weren't.

"Let's play... um..." Uma started.

She stopped.

"...What were we playing?"

Kako didn't answer.

Oobi looked around again.

That feeling.

That *less* feeling.

It wasn't just in the air anymore.

It was everywhere.

Then—

"Down."

Oobi said it suddenly.

Uma blinked. "Down?"

Oobi pointed toward the corner of the room.

There, where there had always just been... more room...

was something new.

A small, square shape.

A door.

Not a big door. Not a colorful door. Just a quiet, plain door sitting flat against the ground like it had always been there... except it hadn't.

Kako leaned closer. "Was that here before?"

Uma shook her head slowly. "No."

Oobi stepped closer.

The door didn't move.

Didn't glow.

Didn't make a sound.

It just *waited*.

"...Basement?" Oobi guessed.

"Basement?" Uma repeated, unsure.

Kako examined it carefully. "We don't have a basement."

Oobi reached out.

Paused.

The air around the door felt heavier, like it didn't want to be touched.

But Oobi touched it anyway.

The handle was cold.

Not just cool.

Cold in a way that didn't match their world at all.

Oobi pulled.

The door creaked open with a long, slow sound that seemed to stretch farther than it should have.

Inside—

Darkness.

Not playful darkness.

Not bedtime darkness.

This was a deeper kind. Thick. Quiet. Like it had been waiting longer than anything else.

Uma swallowed. "Maybe we... don't go down there."

Kako nodded quickly. "Yes. That seems like a good idea."

Oobi looked into the dark.

Then back at his friends.

Then back again.

"...Find answers," he said softly.

The word *answers* hung in the air.

Because that's what this all felt like now.

A question.

And maybe...

this was where answers lived.

Uma hesitated.

Kako hesitated.

But curiosity, that stubborn little spark, flickered to life.

"...We go together," Uma said finally.

"Together," Kako agreed.

Oobi nodded.

Together.

Step by step, they moved closer.

The darkness didn't move.

Didn't react.

Just waited.

Oobi went first.

He lowered himself slowly, disappearing into the shadows.

Then Uma.

Then Kako.

The moment all three were inside—

The door above them closed.

Not loudly.

Not suddenly.

Just... *closed*.

They froze.

"Did you—" Kako started.

"I didn't—" Uma replied.

Oobi looked up.

The door was still there.

But it felt... farther away now.

Like it had decided to be distant.

"Okay," Uma said quickly, trying to stay brave. "It's fine! It's just dark! We just need light!"

"Light," Oobi repeated.

But there was no light.

Not really.

Only enough to see shapes.

And even those shapes didn't feel steady.

The basement stretched out in front of them, wider than it should have been. The walls didn't quite look like walls. The floor didn't quite feel like a floor.

And scattered throughout the space...

Things.

Familiar things.

But not whole.

A piece of a game.

A half-remembered sound.

A place where laughter *should* be, but wasn't anymore.

Oobi stepped toward one of the shapes.

It looked like... a moment.

Not an object.

A moment.

He reached out.

The moment flickered.

Then vanished.

Oobi pulled his hand back quickly.

"Gone," he whispered.

Kako's voice was tight. "I don't like this place."

Uma nodded. "...Me neither."

Then—

A sound.

Soft.

Faint.

Like someone trying to remember how to speak.

All three turned.

"Hello?" Uma called.

No answer.

Just that same almost-sound again.

Oobi took a step toward it.

"Wait," Kako said. "We should stay together."

But Oobi kept moving.

Slowly.

Carefully.

The sound grew a little clearer.

Not words.

Not yet.

Just... presence.

They reached a corner—or something like a corner.

And there, sitting in the dimness, was something familiar.

Very familiar.

"Grampu?" Uma said, her voice hopeful.

The shape looked like him.

The same gentle posture.

The same quiet presence.

But...

Something wasn't right.

He didn't move.

Didn't react.

Didn't speak.

Oobi stepped closer. "Grampu?"

No answer.

Kako leaned in. "...Why isn't he saying anything?"

Oobi reached out.

His hand hovered.

Then gently touched.

The figure flickered.

Just like the moment had.

Just like the clue.

Just like the *missing*.

Oobi pulled back fast.

"...Not Grampu he said"

Uma's voice shook. "Then what is it?"

The figure shimmered again.

And for just a second—

It looked like Grampu.

Then less.

Then less.

Then...

barely anything at all.

Like a memory trying to stay.

Like something being slowly erased.

Kako stepped back. "It's... it's taking him."

Oobi's eyes widened. "Taking..."

The almost-sound returned.

Stronger now.

Not from the figure.

From everywhere.

A whisper without words.

A presence without shape.

Watching.

Waiting.

Taking.

Uma grabbed Oobi and Kako. "We have to go. Now."

Oobi didn't argue.

They turned and ran.

The basement seemed longer now.

The door seemed farther.

The darkness thicker.

But they kept moving.

Together.

Always together.

Finally, they reached the door.

Oobi pushed.

At first, it didn't move.

Then—

Slowly—

It opened.

Light spilled in.

Warm.

Familiar.

Safe.

They scrambled out.

The moment they were all back—

The door slammed shut behind them.

Gone.

Just like that.

No door.

No handle.

No sign it had ever been there.

The room was quiet again.

Normal again.

But not really.

Oobi looked at where the door had been.

"...Grampu," he said softly.

Uma and Kako stood close.

None of them spoke for a moment.

Because now they understood something new.

Something heavier than before.

This wasn't just about things disappearing.

It wasn't random.

It wasn't harmless.

Something was taking pieces of their world.

Pieces of their friends.

And if they didn't stop it...

There might come a day when there was nothing left to remember.

Oobi clenched his little hand.

Not scared.

Not frozen.

Determined.

"...Find," he said.

Uma nodded.

Kako nodded.

The game was over.

The adventure had truly begun.

And somewhere, hidden in the quiet...

something listened.

Tab 5

Chapter Three: The Chalk Outline That Wasn't Chalk

The room felt normal again.

Which was exactly the problem.

Oobi, Uma, and Kako stood where the basement door had been, staring at nothing. The air was bright, the space was tidy, and yet something lingered—like a secret that had just slipped under the rug and was trying not to breathe.

"Grampu..." Oobi whispered.

Uma squeezed her fingers together. "We saw him."

Kako nodded, very still. "And then we didn't."

A quiet stretched.

Not empty.

Listening.

Then Oobi noticed it.

"...Look."

On the floor, faint as a thought you almost forget, was a shape. A soft outline—curving, familiar—like someone had drawn around a figure that used to be there.

But it wasn't chalk.

It shimmered.

Like memory-light.

Uma crouched. "Is that...?"

Kako leaned in, eyes narrowing. "It's shaped like—"

"Grampu," Oobi finished.

They all went silent.

The outline flickered, dimming at the edges, as if it were slowly being erased by invisible hands.

Uma reached toward it. "Wait—don't go."

Her fingers passed through.

The outline rippled.

For a heartbeat, a sound slipped out—warm, gentle, almost a voice:

"...hmm..."

Then it faded again.

Kako inhaled sharply. "That's not a body. It's a *trace*."

"A trace?" Uma asked.

"Like... the mark something leaves behind when it's taken away," Kako said, thinking fast. "In mysteries, that's... a clue."

Oobi's eyes widened. "Clue!"

The word felt right. It landed with a small, solid *click*.

A clue.

Not an ending.

A beginning.

Uma straightened, a spark returning. "Okay. If this is a mystery, we solve it."

Kako nodded, already scanning the room. "We look for patterns. Changes. Anything that doesn't belong."

Oobi pointed. "There!"

Near the edge of the room, just where the basement door had once been, sat a tiny object. Small. Ordinary. Wrong.

They approached it carefully.

It was a button.

Plain, round, and slightly dim—like it used to be brighter. It didn't match anything they recognized. Not Uma's games, not Kako's careful ideas, not anything Oobi had seen before.

Kako studied it. "This wasn't here yesterday."

Uma tilted her head. "It looks... forgotten."

Oobi picked it up.

The moment he did, the air shifted.

A whisper brushed past them—not a word, not a voice, just a feeling of something noticing.

Oobi held the button close. "...Belongs?"

The button gave the tiniest glow, then dimmed again.

Kako's eyes lit up. "Objects connect to owners. If something is being taken, it might leave pieces behind."

"Like breadcrumbs," Uma said.

"Like evidence," Kako corrected gently.

Oobi beamed. "Evidence!"

The outline on the floor flickered again—fainter now, like a candle nearing its last little dance.

Uma hurried back to it. "Wait, don't disappear! We're figuring it out!"

For a second, the outline steadied.

And in that second, a shape appeared beside it—thin, tall, not quite there. A shadow that didn't belong to anything.

Oobi saw it.

"...There," he said.

Kako turned fast. "Where?"

But the shape slipped away, folding into the quiet like it had never been.

Only the outline remained.

Fading.

Fading.

Then—

Gone.

No shimmer.

No trace.

Just floor.

Uma's shoulders dropped. "...We were too late."

Kako shook his head. "No. We're just... not fast enough yet."

Oobi looked at the button in his hand. "Find more."

Uma nodded, determination sparking brighter now. "Yes. We follow the clues. We find where things are going."

Kako added, "And we figure out what's taking them."

The room seemed to lean in, listening.

Somewhere, very faintly, that same not-voice stirred—like pages turning in a book that didn't want to be read.

Oobi closed his little hand around the button.

"Find Grampu," he said.

Not a question this time.

A promise.

And though the room stayed still, something in the quiet shifted—like a game had changed into something deeper, something sharper.

A mystery was unfolding.

Not with loud danger.

Not with crashing fear.

But with missing pieces, fading traces, and a presence that preferred to stay just out of sight.

The kind of mystery where the scariest thing...

was what wasn't there anymore.

Tab 6

Chapter Four: The Door That Led to Work

If the room had a heartbeat, it was trying to hide it.

Oobi stood very still, the small, dim button tucked safely in his hand. Uma paced in tight little loops, thinking fast-thoughts. Kako stayed near the spot where the outline had been, as if staring hard enough might convince it to come back.

"Okay," Uma said, stopping suddenly. "We have a clue. That's good. Clues are good. Clues mean we can solve things."

"Clues also mean something happened," Kako added quietly.

Oobi looked at his hand. "...Happened."

The word didn't feel finished.

Like it needed something after it.

But before any of them could add to it—

The air shifted.

Again.

Not a blink this time.

More like a *fold*.

Right in front of them, where there had only been empty space, a tall, narrow door slowly *unfolded* into existence. It didn't pop in or drop down. It just... decided to be there.

It was brighter than the basement door had been.

Smoother.

Neater.

And taped to the front was a small sign in big, bold letters:

WORK.

Uma blinked. "Work?"

Kako tilted. "We don't go to work."

Oobi stepped closer. "Door..."

The handle looked normal. Friendly, even.

Too friendly.

Uma crossed her fingers. "Okay, but last time we opened a door, we got a creepy basement and disappearing Grampu."

Kako nodded. "Statistically, this is concerning."

Oobi, however, was already reaching.

"Answers," he said simply.

And before either of them could stop him—

He turned the handle.

The door swung open with a cheerful little *click*.

Inside—

Was a place that absolutely, definitely, no-question-about-it did not belong to them.

Bright lights.

Rows of desks.

Papers stacked like tiny skyscrapers.

Phones that rang and rang and rang.

And at the center of it all—

A voice.

Sharp. Fast. Confident.

"Oh no no no, that is NOT how you file those reports! Do you want chaos? Because that's how you get chaos!"

Oobi blinked.

Uma blinked.

Kako blinked.

"...Hello?" Oobi said.

The voice stopped.

Slowly, dramatically, a figure turned.

Sue Worrellman.

She stood behind a desk like it was her command center, posture perfect, expression already halfway to unimpressed.

She looked at them.

Then at the door.

Then back at them.

"...Excuse me?" she said.

Oobi waved. "Hi!"

Sue narrowed her eyes. "No. No 'hi.' What is this? What is *this*?" She pointed sharply. "This is a workplace. A *professional environment*. And you three just walked in like it's a playground!"

Uma raised her hand politely. "Technically, it was a mysterious door—"

"I don't care if it was a singing sandwich!" Sue snapped. "You don't just *wander into work*!"

Kako stepped forward carefully. "We didn't mean to disrupt anything. We're looking for help."

Sue crossed her arms. "Help? From me? You think I have time for... whatever this is?" She gestured at them. "I have schedules. I have deadlines. I have people who cannot alphabetize to save their lives!"

Oobi held up the button. "Clue."

Sue paused.

Just for a second.

Her eyes flicked to it.

"...What is that?" she asked, a little less loudly.

"A button," Uma said. "We found it where something disappeared."

Sue raised an eyebrow. "Things don't just disappear."

"They do," Kako said. "We've seen it."

Sue sighed dramatically, turning away. "Right. Of course you have. And I suppose next you'll tell me the walls are whispering and the floor is eating furniture."

Oobi nodded. "Yes."

Sue froze.

Slowly turned back.

"...I'm sorry, what?"

"The walls don't whisper," Kako clarified. "But there is a presence that seems to observe and remove—"

"Stop," Sue said, holding up a hand. "Stop right there. I have exactly zero minutes for riddles."

Uma stepped closer, more serious now. "We're not joking. Our world is... losing things. Not just objects. Moments. Memories. People."

Sue's expression didn't change.

But something in her eyes sharpened.

"...People," she repeated.

Oobi nodded. "Grampu."

A beat.

Sue tapped her desk once. Twice.

Then pointed. "Explain. Quickly. Clearly. No weirdness."

They all spoke at once.

"Basement—"

"Door wasn't there—"

"Outline on the floor—"

"Button clue—"

"Shadow thing—"

"Missing—"

"Gone—"

Sue slammed her hand on the desk.

"STOP."

Silence snapped into place.

Sue took a slow breath.

Then another.

"...One at a time," she said tightly.

So they did.

They told her everything.

The blinking.

The basement.

The flickering Grampu.

The outline.

The button.

The feeling of *less*.

Sue didn't interrupt this time.

Didn't snap.

Didn't sigh.

She just listened.

And as she listened, something subtle shifted.

Not in the room.

In her.

When they finished, the office felt... quieter.

Not silent.

Just... less busy.

Sue tapped the desk again, slower now.

"...That's ridiculous," she said.

Oobi's shoulders dropped a little.

"...But," Sue added quickly, raising a finger, "it's *specifically* ridiculous in a way that bothers me."

Kako tilted. "Bothers you how?"

Sue leaned forward. "Because things *don't* disappear here."

She gestured around sharply. "This place runs on order. On records. On everything being exactly where it's supposed to be."

Uma blinked. "So... nothing's missing?"

Sue opened her mouth.

Paused.

Looked over her shoulder.

At a shelf.

Her expression flickered.

"...There was a file," she said slowly.

"File?" Oobi echoed.

Sue walked over, heels clicking with purpose. "Right here. Blue tab. Very important. I filed it this morning."

She reached for it.

Her hand stopped.

The space was empty.

Sue stared.

"...No," she said.

She checked the shelf again.

And again.

Faster now.

"No, no, no, no—this is not happening."

Kako stepped closer. "It's the same pattern."

Sue spun around. "I do not *have patterns*, I have *systems*!"

But her voice wasn't as sharp anymore.

It was thinner.

Tighter.

"Was it important?" Uma asked gently.

Sue hesitated.

Then, quieter:

"...Yes."

The word hung there.

Heavy.

Oobi stepped forward. "Same."

Sue looked at him.

Really looked this time.

At his small, determined expression.

At the button in his hand.

At the way the room didn't quite feel right anymore.

"...Okay," she said.

The word surprised even her.

She straightened, snapping back into her usual posture—but not completely.

"...Okay," she repeated, firmer now. "If something is coming into my workplace and removing important items without authorization, that is unacceptable."

Kako blinked. "So... you believe us?"

Sue crossed her arms. "I believe that something is interfering with my files. That is enough."

Uma smiled a little. "We're trying to find it."

Sue nodded once. "Good. Because now I am too."

Oobi brightened. "Help?"

Sue pointed at him. "I am not 'help.' I am *in charge of solving this problem efficiently*."

"...Help," Oobi repeated happily.

Sue sighed. "Fine. Whatever."

She looked at the button.

"...That's your only clue?"

Oobi held it out.

Sue took it carefully.

Examined it.

Turned it.

Tapped it once.

The button flickered faintly.

Sue's eyes narrowed.

"...Interesting."

The lights in the office dimmed slightly.

Just for a second.

Then returned.

All four of them froze.

"...Did you see that?" Uma whispered.

Sue didn't answer.

She was staring at the far end of the office.

Where, for just a moment—

Something had moved.

Not a person.

Not a shadow.

Just a *shift*.

Like reality adjusting itself.

Sue's voice dropped, just a fraction.

"...We have a problem."

Oobi nodded.

"Find," he said.

Sue straightened.

Adjusted her stance.

Tapped the button once more.

"...We will," she said.

And somewhere in the neat rows of papers and perfect systems...

something unseen paused.

As if it had just realized—

it was no longer unnoticed.

Tab 7

Chapter Five: The Wall That Threw Things Back

The office didn't close behind them.

It folded.

One moment there were ringing phones and Sue's perfectly stacked papers. The next, the air wrinkled like a page being turned too quickly, and Oobi, Uma, Kako, and Sue stepped out into somewhere else entirely.

A yard.

A wall.

A *very specific* wall.

Oobi's eyes widened. "Home... but not home."

The place looked familiar, but not in a comfortable way. The colors were a little too flat, the shadows a little too sharp. The sky didn't feel like it was above them so much as *watching* them.

And there it was.

The wall.

Tall. Plain. Dividing everything into *this side* and *that side*.

Uma squinted. "Wait... I know this place."

Kako nodded slowly. "Yes. This is where—"

"HEY!"

The voice cracked through the air like a snapped ruler.

All four of them froze.

From the other side of the wall came a loud *thump*, followed by the unmistakable sound of something being picked up aggressively.

"IF YOU THROW ONE MORE RANDOM THING OVER THIS WALL—"

A hand shot up from the other side and hurled something back over.

It landed near Oobi with a soft bounce.

A rubber duck.

Oobi blinked. "Duck."

"YEAH, DUCK!" the voice snapped. "BECAUSE SOMEONE KEEPS THROWING JUNK INTO MY YARD LIKE IT'S A TRASH PARADE!"

Uma winced. "Uh oh."

Kako leaned toward her. "This is the neighbor."

"The neighbor?" Sue repeated, already annoyed. "Of course there's a neighbor."

Another object flew over the wall.

A sock.

Then a spoon.

Then, somehow, a single shoe.

"I AM NOT YOUR STORAGE UNIT!" the neighbor shouted. "I AM A PERSON WITH A VERY NICE YARD THAT YOU KEEP TURNING INTO A MYSTERY PILE!"

Oobi looked down at the growing pile.

"...Oops?"

"Don't 'oops' me!" the neighbor barked. "I KNOW IT'S YOU, OOBI! YOU AND YOUR RANDOM THROWING HABITS!"

Uma crossed her fingers. "Technically, we didn't throw those..."

Kako added, "Not intentionally."

Sue stepped forward, already done with all of this. "Excuse me! Can we have a moment of calm, organized communication?"

There was a pause.

"...Who is THAT?" the neighbor demanded.

"Sue Worrellman," she said crisply. "And I would like to address the current situation with efficiency and—"

A tennis ball flew over the wall and bounced off her deskless authority.

Sue blinked.

Slowly.

"...You threw something at me."

"I THREW IT BACK," the neighbor corrected. "BIG DIFFERENCE."

Oobi picked up the tennis ball.

"...Not ours," he said.

Everyone stopped.

Uma looked at him. "What do you mean?"

Oobi held it up. "We didn't throw."

Kako stepped closer, examining it. "He's right. This isn't from us."

Sue crossed her arms. "So if you didn't throw it... and he didn't start with it..."

They all looked at the wall.

Quiet.

Still.

Suspicious.

"...Then where did it come from?" Uma asked.

As if answering her—

Something flew over the wall again.

But this time...

No one had thrown it.

It just *appeared* mid-air and dropped.

A small, faded object.

A blue tab.

Sue lunged forward and caught it before it hit the ground.

Her eyes widened.

"...My file tab."

The missing one.

Kako's voice sharpened. "It's moving things."

"Through the wall," Uma added.

Oobi looked up. "...Taking. Throwing."

From the other side, the neighbor spoke again—but quieter now.

"...Okay, that's new," he admitted.

Sue stepped closer to the wall. "Listen carefully. We are dealing with an unauthorized, pattern-based removal system that is redistributing objects across boundaries."

"...You mean weird stuff is flying over the wall by itself?" the neighbor said.

"...Yes," Sue replied.

"...Yeah, okay, that sounds right."

A beat.

Then—

"BUT I'M STILL MAD ABOUT THE PREVIOUS STUFF!" he snapped again.

Uma sighed. "Fair."

Kako pointed at the wall. "If it can send objects over... it might also be taking things from the other side."

Oobi gasped. "Neighbor things!"

There was a long pause.

"...No," the neighbor said immediately.

Another pause.

"...Wait," he added.

Something shifted again.

That same almost-presence.

Closer this time.

Right at the top of the wall.

The air bent slightly, like heat over pavement.

Sue narrowed her eyes. "There."

Oobi pointed. "There!"

Uma whispered, "I see it..."

Kako stepped forward. "It's observing again."

For a brief second—

A shape formed.

Not solid.

Not clear.

But definitely there.

Watching them.

Then—

Pop.

Gone.

And in its place—

Something dropped over the wall.

A small, worn object.

It landed softly.

Oobi picked it up.

Looked at it.

His expression changed.

"...Grampu," he said quietly.

It wasn't Grampu.

Not really.

Just a tiny piece.

A trace.

Something that used to belong.

Uma's voice shook. "It's... breaking things apart."

Kako nodded grimly. "Taking pieces. Leaving pieces. Moving them."

Sue clenched her hand around the file tab. "Organizing chaos," she muttered. "In the worst possible way."

From the other side, the neighbor spoke again.

Not yelling this time.

"...Okay," he said slowly. "I don't like this."

"Neither do we," Uma replied.

Oobi looked at the wall.

Then at the piece in his hand.

Then up at where the shape had been.

"...Find," he said again.

This time, quieter.

But stronger.

The wall stood still.

Dividing.

Hiding.

And maybe...

not just separating two yards.

But two sides of something much bigger.

And somewhere just out of sight—

something waited for them to throw the next move

Tab 8

Chapter Six: Ol' Blue Eyes and the Case of the Borrowed Gaze

The wall didn't answer.

It just stood there, doing its best impression of innocence.

Oobi held the small piece that belonged to Grampu. Uma hovered close, like she could keep it from fading by sheer determination. Kako watched the top of the wall, tracking patterns that refused to stay still. Sue tapped the blue tab against her palm, already irritated at reality for not filing itself correctly.

"Alright," Sue said, crisp as a paper edge. "We have a boundary, we have displacement, and we have an entity that—"

A low, smooth voice drifted in from somewhere behind them.

"—and we have a situation that could use a little... perspective."

They turned.

Leaning against nothing in particular, as if the air had agreed to support him, stood **Ol' Blue Eyes**.

He wasn't loud like the neighbor. He didn't snap like Sue. He simply... existed with confidence, like the scene had been waiting for him to arrive.

His gaze was calm. Knowing. A little too knowing.

Oobi blinked. "Hi."

Ol' Blue Eyes gave a small nod. "Hey there, kid."

Uma whispered to Kako, "He looks like he knows secrets."

Kako whispered back, "He looks like he *is* a secret."

Sue crossed her arms immediately. "And you are?"

"Name's Ol' Blue Eyes," he said smoothly. "I keep an eye on things."

"...Of course you do," Sue muttered.

Oobi stepped forward, hopeful. "You see?"

Ol' Blue Eyes tilted his head slightly. "I see a lot of things."

"Then you saw it!" Uma said quickly. "The thing on the wall! The... the taking thing!"

He didn't answer right away.

Instead, he looked at the wall.

Then at the ground.

Then at the small object in Oobi's hand.

"...Yeah," he said quietly. "I saw it."

A hush fell over the group.

Kako leaned in. "What is it?"

Ol' Blue Eyes gave a half-smile. "That's the tricky part. It's not really a *what*."

Sue sighed. "Wonderful. Vague answers. My favorite."

He ignored that.

"It's more like a... habit," he continued. "A pattern that learned how to move. Something that noticed things get left behind... and decided to start collecting."

"Collecting?" Uma repeated.

Oobi looked down. "...Taking."

Ol' Blue Eyes nodded once. "Taking, borrowing, shifting... depends on how you look at it."

Sue snapped, "I look at it as *unauthorized removal of important materials*."

"That tracks," he said casually.

Kako's voice was careful. "If it's collecting... then why leave pieces behind?"

Ol' Blue Eyes glanced at him, impressed. "Because it doesn't understand what matters. It just knows *something* does."

Uma's eyes widened. "So it grabs things... but doesn't know which parts are important?"

"Exactly," he said. "Like picking up a song and only keeping a few notes."

Oobi looked at the Grampu piece in his hand.

"...Not whole," he whispered.

"Not whole," Ol' Blue Eyes echoed.

The air grew heavier.

Not darker.

Just... more serious.

Sue stepped forward. "And how long has this 'pattern' been operating?"

Ol' Blue Eyes shrugged lightly. "Long enough to get good at hiding."

The neighbor's voice popped up from behind the wall again. "HEY! IS THIS GUY WITH YOU OR IS HE JUST SHOWING UP MYSTERIOUSLY BECAUSE I DO NOT LIKE THAT EITHER!"

Ol' Blue Eyes didn't even turn. "I'm just visiting."

"I DON'T LIKE VISITS I DIDN'T APPROVE!" the neighbor yelled.

"Noted," he replied calmly.

Kako focused again. "If it's learning... then it can adapt."

Sue nodded. "Which means it can get worse."

Uma frowned. "Or better... at taking."

Oobi looked up. "Stop it?"

Ol' Blue Eyes met his gaze.

For the first time, his calm expression shifted just a little.

"...Maybe," he said.

"Maybe?" Sue repeated sharply.

He gestured lightly around them. "You've already done something it didn't expect."

"What?" Uma asked.

"You noticed," he said.

Silence.

Even the wall seemed to hold still.

Kako's eyes lit with realization. "It prefers not to be seen."

"Exactly," Ol' Blue Eyes said. "It works in the background. Quiet. Unnoticed. The moment you start paying attention..."

Sue finished the thought. "...you interrupt the system."

Oobi smiled. "See."

Ol' Blue Eyes nodded. "See."

For a second, everything felt aligned.

Clues.

Patterns.

Purpose.

Then—

The air at the top of the wall shifted again.

Stronger this time.

More visible.

Like something trying to stay hidden and failing just a little.

Oobi pointed. "There!"

Uma stepped forward. "It's back!"

Kako focused sharply. "It's reacting to us."

Sue tightened her grip on the file tab. "Good. That means we can track it."

Ol' Blue Eyes watched silently.

The shape flickered into partial form—taller now, clearer, like it was being pulled into existence by their attention.

Then it jerked.

Like it didn't want to be seen.

And suddenly—

Objects began to fall.

Not one.

Not two.

A scatter of them.

From both sides of the wall.

Buttons.

Papers.

Little pieces of things.

Fragments.

Clues.

Memories.

All dropping at once like the world had shaken loose its pockets.

Oobi reached out, trying to catch as many as he could.

"Too many!" Uma cried.

"It's losing control," Kako said.

"No," Ol' Blue Eyes corrected quietly.

"It's panicking."

Sue looked up, eyes sharp. "Good. Let it."

The shape flickered harder.

Unstable.

Visible.

And for the first time—

It felt like they were getting closer.

Oobi clutched the pieces he could hold.

"...Find," he said again.

Ol' Blue Eyes looked at him, something thoughtful behind his calm.

"Yeah," he said softly.

"Now you're getting somewhere."

And above the wall, caught between hiding and being seen...

the mystery finally started to crack.

Tab 9

Chapter Seven: The Employee Who Spoke in Silence

The air was still shaking from the falling pieces.

Buttons. Tabs. Tiny fragments of something once whole. They lay scattered across the ground like clues that had tripped and spilled themselves.

Oobi crouched, carefully gathering what he could. Uma tried to sort them into little piles. Kako studied each one like it might whisper its story if he stared long enough. Sue stood tall, already trying to organize the chaos into something that obeyed rules.

Ol' Blue Eyes watched.

Quiet.

Thinking.

Then—

A soft *tap*.

Not loud.

Not sharp.

Just... there.

Everyone looked up.

Standing a few steps away, as if he had always been part of the scene, was another figure.

Dressed simply.

Face calm.

Hands already moving.

The Mime Employee.

He didn't speak.

Didn't clear his throat.

Didn't announce himself.

He simply raised one hand and *pressed* it against nothing.

And suddenly—

There was a wall.

Not the real wall.

A different one.

Invisible, but unmistakable.

Uma gasped. "He made... a wall?"

Kako leaned in. "No. He's showing one."

The Mime Employee nodded slightly, as if that was close enough.

Sue narrowed her eyes. "And you are... not going to introduce yourself with words, I assume."

The Mime Employee smiled faintly.

Then mimed tipping an invisible hat.

"Great," Sue said flatly. "Another one."

Oobi waved. "Hi!"

The Mime waved back, then immediately got to work.

He pointed at the scattered objects.

Then at the invisible wall he was holding.

Then—

He mimed something slipping through it.

Oobi's eyes widened. "Go through!"

Kako nodded quickly. "Yes. The objects are passing through boundaries."

The Mime gave a small approving gesture.

Uma leaned closer. "Can you show us how?"

The Mime paused.

Then began a careful, slow performance.

He mimed holding something precious in his hands.

He looked at it fondly.

Then—

He *forgot* it.

Not dropped.

Not thrown.

Just... turned away.

The invisible object slipped from his hands, drifted toward the invisible wall—

And passed right through it.

Gone.

Oobi whispered, "...Forget."

Kako's voice sharpened. "It takes what's unattended."

Sue snapped her fingers. "Of course. Untracked items. Unsecured. Unaccounted for."

The Mime pointed at her, impressed.

"...Thank you," Sue said, a little too pleased.

Uma frowned. "But Grampu wasn't forgotten."

The Mime paused at that.

His expression changed.

Slower now, he repeated the motion.

Holding something.

But this time—

The thing struggled.

It didn't want to be forgotten.

It stayed.

For a moment.

Then—

Piece by piece—

Parts of it slipped away anyway.

Through the wall.

Oobi clutched the small Grampu piece tighter.

"...Still take," he said.

The Mime nodded.

Gently.

Then he mimed something new.

He placed both hands around an invisible object.

Focused on it.

Watched it.

Protected it.

The object stayed.

Didn't move.

Didn't fade.

Didn't slip away.

Uma's eyes lit up. "Attention!"

Kako nodded. "Awareness prevents removal."

Sue crossed her arms. "So the solution is simple. We keep track of everything."

Ol' Blue Eyes spoke up softly, "Not everything."

They all looked at him.

He nodded toward Oobi.

"Just what matters."

Oobi looked down at the piece in his hand.

Then back up.

"...Grampu matters."

The Mime placed a hand over his heart.

Then pointed to Oobi.

Agreement.

From the other side of the wall, the neighbor yelled, "I DON'T KNOW WHAT'S HAPPENING BUT IF ANYTHING ELSE FLOATS INTO MY YARD I'M STARTING A COMPLAINT!"

Sue called back, "NOTED!"

Then, quieter, to the group:

"We focus. We track. We protect."

Kako added, "And we observe the pattern."

Uma smiled slightly. "And we don't let things go unnoticed."

Oobi nodded firmly. "See."

The Mime gave a final demonstration.

He pointed at the top of the wall.

Then slowly, deliberately...

He *looked*.

Hard.

Focused.

Intent.

The air at the top of the wall shifted.

Again.

But this time—

It didn't disappear right away.

It flickered.

Struggled.

Like being seen was holding it in place.

Oobi pointed. "There!"

Uma stepped forward. "It's staying!"

Kako's voice was steady. "We're anchoring it."

Sue's eyes sharpened. "Good. Keep it there."

Ol' Blue Eyes watched, thoughtful.

The Mime held his gaze.

The shape wavered.

Caught between hiding and being known.

For the first time—

It looked unsure.

And in that fragile moment, surrounded by silence, focus, and stubborn attention...

the mystery didn't just feel close.

It felt like it might finally have to answer.

Without a single word, the Mime lowered his hands.

And somehow...

he had said everything.

Tab 10

Chapter Eight: The Boss Who Walked In Like a Deadline

The shape at the top of the wall flickered, caught in their attention like a moth in a jar.

"Keep looking," Kako said, voice steady.
"I am looking," Uma replied, eyes wide.
"I am *tracking*," Sue corrected, sharper than usual.

Oobi held the small piece of Grampu close. "Stay," he whispered.

The Mime Employee stood perfectly still, gaze locked upward, hands gently framing the invisible boundary. Ol' Blue Eyes watched with that same quiet knowing, like he was letting the moment unfold on purpose.

And then—

Footsteps.

Not rushed.

Not loud.

But *important*.

The kind of footsteps that expected floors to behave.

They echoed from nowhere and everywhere at once.

Sue froze.

"...Wait," she said, straightening instantly. "Those footsteps are—"

The air folded again.

Neatly this time.

Like a document being placed in the correct folder.

And out of that fold stepped—

The Boss.

Everything about him felt... organized.

His presence didn't just enter the scene, it arranged it. The scattered objects seemed to settle. The air aligned. Even the tension paused, as if waiting for instructions.

Sue's posture snapped into absolute perfection.

"Oh—sir!" she said, suddenly very composed. "You're—here."

The Boss gave a calm nod. "I am."

His voice was smooth. Measured. The kind of voice that didn't need to be loud to be heard.

Oobi blinked. "Hi."

The Boss looked at him, not surprised, just... aware. "Hello."

Uma leaned toward Kako. "He feels important."

Kako whispered back, "He is important."

Sue stepped forward quickly. "Sir, we are currently dealing with a highly irregular situation involving unauthorized displacement of objects across multiple spatial boundaries—"

The Boss raised a hand.

Sue stopped instantly.

Silence.

He glanced at the wall.

At the flickering shape.

At the scattered pieces.

At the button in Oobi's hand.

At everything.

"...Yes," he said simply. "I can see that."

Sue nodded quickly. "Of course you can."

There was a tiny pause.

Sue's expression softened just a fraction.

"...You always can," she added, quieter.

Uma noticed.

Kako definitely noticed.

Oobi noticed... something.

The Boss stepped closer to the wall.

The shape reacted immediately, flickering harder, like it didn't like being observed by *him*.

"Interesting," he said.

Ol' Blue Eyes tilted his head. "You've seen this before?"

The Boss didn't look at him. "Not exactly this."

Sue leaned in. "But something like it?"

Another pause.

"...Patterns that go unnoticed tend to grow," he said. "Until they are noticed."

Kako nodded. "That's what we've been doing."

"Good," the Boss replied.

Oobi stepped forward. "Find."

The Boss looked down at him.

Then at the small piece in his hand.

"...What are you trying to find?" he asked.

Oobi held it up. "Grampu."

The Boss studied the piece.

For a moment, his calm expression shifted—just slightly.

"...I see," he said.

Sue watched him closely.

Too closely.

"You always see," she said again, softer this time.

The Boss didn't respond to that.

Instead, he turned back to the wall.

The shape flickered, unstable now.

Caught between too many eyes.

The Mime Employee stepped beside him, mirroring his stance.

Still.

Focused.

The Boss did something simple.

He just... looked.

Not like the others.

Not just attention.

Something deeper.

Intent.

Understanding.

The air tightened.

The shape *stopped moving*.

Completely.

Oobi gasped. "Stay!"

Uma smiled. "It's working!"

Kako's voice sharpened. "No—it's being held."

Sue stepped closer, impressed despite herself. "Controlled observation."

Ol' Blue Eyes watched carefully. "...That's new."

The Boss spoke, calm and clear:

"You don't chase patterns like this."

The group listened.

"You define them."

The shape trembled.

As if those words had weight.

Oobi squeezed the Grampu piece. "...Define?"

The Boss nodded slightly. "You decide what it is allowed to be."

Uma whispered, "So we tell it what it is?"

Kako added, "Instead of letting it decide?"

Sue's eyes lit up. "That's... extremely efficient."

The Boss stepped back slightly.

"Try," he said.

All of them focused.

Together.

Oobi: "Stop taking."
Uma: "Stay here."
Kako: "You are seen."
Sue: "You are contained."

The Mime held the invisible boundary steady.

Ol' Blue Eyes watched the edges.

The shape flickered wildly—

Then slowed.

Then steadied.

For the first time...

It didn't try to disappear.

Oobi smiled. "Got it."

Sue allowed herself a small, satisfied nod.

The Boss observed quietly.

Then—

The shape pulsed.

Once.

Twice.

And suddenly—

It slipped.

Not gone.

Not escaped.

Just... shifted.

Out of their hold.

Back into the almost-space.

Weaker.

But not finished.

Kako exhaled. "It's adapting."

"Of course it is," Sue said.

Oobi looked up. "Again?"

The Boss nodded once. "Again."

Sue looked at him.

Just for a moment.

Not as a problem-solver.

Not as a leader.

But as something else entirely.

"...Of course," she said softly.

Then she snapped back. "Alright! Everyone focus! We refine the method!"

The neighbor's voice shouted from the other side of the wall, "I DON'T KNOW WHO THE NEW GUY IS BUT HE SEEMS TOO CALM AND I DON'T TRUST THAT!"

No one answered.

Because now they knew something important.

This wasn't just a mystery anymore.

It was a system.

A pattern.

A thing that could be understood.

And maybe—

just maybe—

stopped.

Oobi looked at the space where the shape had slipped away.

"...Find," he said again.

The Boss stood beside him.

Watching.

Waiting.

And somewhere, just beyond sight...

the pattern was watching back.

Tab 11

Chapter Nine: The Playground That Remembered

The wall stood quiet after the Boss's words, like it had been given instructions and was still deciding whether to follow them.

"Again," Sue said, already reorganizing their focus.
"Again," Oobi echoed.

But before they could begin—

A sound drifted in.

Not from the wall.

From the side.

A soft, squeaky *creak... creak...*

Uma turned first. "Wait... do you hear that?"

Kako nodded. "Yes. Repetitive. Mechanical."

Oobi pointed. "There!"

Just beside the neighbor's yard—so close it almost felt like it had been hiding there the whole time—a small playground shimmered into clarity.

It hadn't been there before.

Or maybe...

it had been *forgotten*.

A swing moved gently back and forth, though no one sat on it. The slide looked a little faded, like it had lost a few memories. The sandbox sat still, untouched.

And in the middle of it—

Something small.

Something familiar.

Uma stepped forward slowly.

Her voice dropped to a whisper.

"...Moppy?"

Oobi looked. "Moppy!"

Kako followed carefully. "Uma's friend."

Sue crossed her arms, watching closely. "Another displaced entity."

The Boss remained quiet, observing.

Ol' Blue Eyes tilted his head, interested.

The Mime Employee pointed gently toward the playground, encouraging focus.

Uma moved faster now.

"Moppy!" she called, hopeful and worried all at once.

There, near the base of the slide, lay Moppy.

Still.

Not moving.

Not gone.

But not quite... there.

Uma knelt beside her. "Moppy, wake up!"

No response.

Oobi crouched too, peeking close. "...Sleep?"

Kako shook his head. "Not sleep."

Sue stepped in, analytical. "She's present, but unresponsive. Like a file that exists but won't open."

Uma gently nudged Moppy. "Come on... say something..."

Moppy flickered.

Just slightly.

Like a weak signal.

Uma gasped. "She moved!"

Oobi leaned closer. "Moppy?"

For a second—

Moppy's form brightened.

Her eyes opened halfway.

"...Uma...?" she murmured faintly.

Uma's face lit up. "Yes! I'm here!"

But then—

Moppy flickered again.

Dimmer this time.

"...Can't... stay..." she whispered.

The words barely held together.

Oobi looked worried. "Stay!"

Kako's voice sharpened. "She's being affected the same way."

Sue nodded. "Partial removal. In progress."

Uma shook her head. "No, no, no—she's still here! We can fix this!"

The Boss stepped closer, calm as ever. "Focus."

The Mime Employee immediately mirrored him, hands gently framing Moppy like protecting something fragile.

Ol' Blue Eyes spoke softly, "She's slipping between being noticed and being... collected."

Uma grabbed Moppy's hand. "I see you. I SEE you, Moppy!"

Oobi joined in. "See Moppy!"

Kako added, steady and precise, "You are present. You are here."

Sue followed, firm and controlled, "You are accounted for."

The air tightened.

The playground seemed to pause.

Even the swing stopped creaking.

Moppy flickered—

Then steadied slightly.

Her form became clearer.

"...Uma..." she said again, stronger now.

Uma smiled, almost crying. "Yes! Stay with me!"

Moppy looked around weakly. "Everything feels... far away..."

Oobi shook his head. "Close! Stay close!"

The shape above the wall flickered again—reacting.

Stronger this time.

Like it didn't like what they were doing.

Kako noticed immediately. "It's trying to pull her again."

Sue snapped, "Not if we maintain focus!"

The Boss nodded once. "Hold it."

All of them stayed locked in.

Attention.

Awareness.

Presence.

The Mime Employee reinforced the invisible boundary.

Ol' Blue Eyes watched the edges for movement.

The playground itself seemed to sharpen, colors returning slightly, details filling back in.

Moppy took a shaky breath.

"I... almost forgot..." she said.

Uma squeezed her hand. "Don't forget! I'm right here!"

Moppy nodded weakly. "...I know."

The pull weakened.

Just a little.

But enough.

Kako exhaled. "We're stabilizing her."

Sue allowed herself a small, satisfied smile. "Efficient teamwork."

Oobi beamed. "Stay!"

The Boss observed quietly.

Then said, "Good."

The simplest word.

But it landed like approval.

Moppy slowly sat up, still faint but no longer fading.

Uma laughed softly, relieved. "You're okay!"

"...I think so," Moppy said.

But then she looked past them.

Toward the wall.

Toward the place where the shape had been.

Her expression shifted.

"...It's not done," she said quietly.

Silence followed.

Because they all knew—

She was right.

Oobi stood, still holding onto her hand.

"...We find," he said.

The playground creaked again, softer now.

Less lonely.

But not safe.

Not yet.

Because whatever was taking things...

had just lost one.

And it wasn't going to like that.

Tab 12

Chapter Ten: The Bottle That Asked to Be Thrown

The playground held its breath.

Moppy sat up slowly, color returning to her like a sunrise remembering its job. Uma stayed close, one hand wrapped around Moppy's, as if letting go might let the world take another bite.

"Better?" Oobi asked.

"...Better," Moppy said, though her voice still felt thin at the edges.

Kako scanned the area. "We should assume the pattern will try again."

Sue nodded. "Agreed. We need more data. Preferably organized."

The Boss watched the perimeter. Ol' Blue Eyes watched the spaces *between* the perimeter. The Mime Employee kept his invisible frame steady, like a careful librarian holding a fragile page open.

Then—

A soft *glorp*.

Everyone turned.

Near the sandbox, something had just appeared.

Not dropped.

Not thrown.

Arrived.

Half-buried in the sand sat a small glass bottle. Inside it, curled like a secret, was a piece of paper... and something bright.

Oobi pointed. "Bottle!"

Uma helped Moppy stand. "Careful."

They approached together.

The bottle looked ordinary, but the sand around it was too smooth, like it had been placed instead of found. A tiny plastic orange baby toy bobbed inside, pressed against the glass, smiling in that fixed, toy-way that never quite matches the moment.

Kako crouched. "It wasn't here before."

Sue crossed her arms. "Of course it wasn't."

Oobi picked it up gently. The glass felt cool, almost echoing the basement door's chill.

"...Open?" he asked.

"Open," Uma said.

"Document first," Sue added, but Oobi had already eased the cork free with a soft *pop*.

He tipped the contents into his palm.

Out slid the note.

And the tiny orange baby toy.

It was small, bright, and slightly scuffed, like it had traveled farther than toys usually do. It gave a faint squeak when Oobi pressed it.

"...Baby," Oobi said.

Moppy leaned in. "I remember those."

Kako unfolded the note carefully, smoothing its creases like they mattered.

They read together.

"throw over the neighbors walls – tommy"

Silence.

The playground seemed to lean closer.

Sue blinked. "Excuse me?"

Uma read it again, slower. "Throw... over the neighbor's walls."

Oobi looked at the wall. "...Throw?"

Moppy frowned. "Tommy?"

Kako's mind clicked into motion. "This could be a directive. Or a message. Or both."

Sue tapped the air, thinking. "So someone named Tommy is instructing objects to be thrown over the wall. Which aligns with the neighbor's complaints."

From the other side, right on cue:

"I KNEW IT!" the neighbor yelled. "I KNEW THERE WAS A NOTE! THERE'S ALWAYS A NOTE!"

Ol' Blue Eyes gave a small smile. "Seems we've got a sender."

The Boss stepped closer, studying the paper. "Or a habit with a signature."

Uma tilted her head. "You think Tommy is the one... taking things?"

Kako considered it. "Or the one who started it."

Moppy hugged her arms. "It didn't feel like a person."

Oobi squeezed the orange toy. "Squeak."

It squeaked again.

The sound felt... louder than it should.

The air twitched.

At the top of the wall—

A flicker.

Stronger.

The shape stirred, as if the note had rung a bell only it could hear.

Sue's eyes sharpened. "Reaction observed."

The Mime Employee pointed at the toy, then mimed tossing it up and over the invisible boundary.

Oobi followed the motion. "...Throw."

Uma hesitated. "The note says to do it..."

Kako finished, "Which suggests it wants us to."

"Or it expects us to," Sue corrected.

The Boss spoke, calm as ever. "And expectation is a kind of doorway."

They all looked at the wall.

At the space above it.

At the place where things crossed.

Moppy whispered, "When I was fading... it felt like I was being pulled *through* something."

Kako nodded. "A channel."

Sue added, "A transfer point."

Ol' Blue Eyes: "A bad habit with a good aim."

Oobi held up the toy.

"...Do we throw?"

The neighbor shouted immediately, "NO!"

A beat.

"...I mean—if it helps, maybe? BUT ALSO NO!"

Uma bit her lip. "If we do what the note says, we might see what happens."

Kako agreed. "Controlled test."

Sue sighed. "Fine. But we track it precisely."

The Mime Employee set his invisible frame higher, ready.

Ol' Blue Eyes watched the edges.

The Boss nodded once. "Proceed."

Oobi looked at the toy.

Then at Uma.

Then at the wall.

"...Okay."

He drew his hand back.

Small.

Careful.

Then—

He tossed the orange baby toy up and over the wall.

For a moment—

Nothing.

Then—

The air split.

Right where the toy crossed.

The shape surged into visibility, grabbing the moment like it had been waiting for it.

The toy didn't fall.

It *paused*.

Mid-air.

Caught.

The shape pulsed, brighter than before, almost forming—

And for the first time—

A voice.

Not clear.

Not whole.

But there.

"...more..."

Oobi's eyes widened. "Talk!"

Kako leaned forward. "It's responding!"

Sue's voice sharpened. "It wants repetition. Input."

Uma whispered, "It wants more things thrown."

Moppy shook her head. "No... it wants more *pieces*."

The toy dropped on the other side of the wall with a soft thud.

The shape flickered again.

Hungry.

Waiting.

The note crinkled in Kako's hand.

"throw over the neighbors walls – tommy"

Ol' Blue Eyes exhaled slowly. "Tommy taught it a trick."

The Boss watched the fading shape. "And now the trick is teaching itself."

Oobi looked at the wall.

Then at the note.

Then at his friends.

"...Find Tommy," he said.

This time, it wasn't just a guess.

It was the next step.

Because somewhere—

behind the throwing,

behind the taking,

behind the pattern—

there was a beginning.

And beginnings...

can be found.

Tab 13

Chapter Eleven: The Mystery of Tommy (The Name That Didn't Sit Still)

Names are usually simple.

They point.

They belong.

They stay.

But "Tommy" didn't.

It slid around the room like a word that couldn't decide where it lived. The note crinkled in Kako's careful hands, the letters steady on paper but strangely unsettled in meaning.

"Tommy," Uma said again, testing it.
Oobi echoed, "Tommy."
Moppy whispered it softer, like it might break.

Sue, of course, went straight to structure. "We establish identity, origin, and intent. That's how you solve a problem."

Ol' Blue Eyes leaned back slightly. "Sometimes a name isn't a person."

The Boss added, calm and precise, "Sometimes it's a pattern wearing a label."

Kako's eyes lit. "A signature without a source."

Oobi tilted his head. "...Not person?"

The playground creaked.

The wall stayed quiet.

The note stayed the same.

But the *feeling* of the name shifted, like it was listening to them say it.

Moppy frowned. "When I was fading... I think I heard something."

Everyone turned to her.

"What did it sound like?" Uma asked.

Moppy closed her eyes, concentrating. "Not a voice... more like a thought that didn't finish. It felt like... like someone trying to remember something important but only getting the first part."

"...Tommy," Kako said.

She nodded.

Sue tapped her fingers together. "So we're dealing with incomplete information. That tracks with everything else."

"Pieces," Oobi said.

"Exactly," Kako replied.

Ol' Blue Eyes stepped closer to the wall, looking not at it, but *through* it. "If Tommy is a fragment, then we don't find him in one place."

"We find him in many," the Boss finished.

The Mime Employee nodded and began to move.

He mimed holding a full object.

Then breaking it apart.

Then scattering the pieces.

Then trying to gather them again—only to end up with something... not quite the same.

Uma's eyes widened. "Tommy might be broken."

Kako added, "Or divided."

Sue crossed her arms. "Or poorly organized."

The neighbor shouted from the other side, "OR A MENACE!"

No one disagreed.

They gathered everything.

The button.

The file tab.

The Grampu piece.

The note.

Even the memory of the orange toy's path through the air.

Sue insisted on arrangement.

"Everything in rows," she said. "Clear categories."

"Clues," Oobi said happily.

"Yes. Clues," Sue confirmed.

They laid them out on the playground floor.

It didn't look like much.

But it *felt* like something.

Kako crouched, studying the items. "These don't match."

Uma blinked. "What do you mean?"

"They're from different contexts," he explained. "Different places. Different purposes."

Sue nodded. "Office materials. Personal items. Emotional connections."

Oobi added, "Grampu."

Moppy hugged herself slightly.

Ol' Blue Eyes spoke quietly. "The pattern doesn't care what it takes."

"It just takes," Uma said.

"But the note does care," Kako countered, holding it up. "It gives direction."

Sue's eyes sharpened. "So the note is different from the pattern."

The Boss nodded once. "The note is intentional."

Silence.

That word landed heavier than the others.

Intentional.

Moppy's voice was small. "So... someone wrote it?"

"Or something learned to," Ol' Blue Eyes said.

The Mime Employee stepped forward and mimed writing.

Then he stopped.

Looked confused.

Then mimed copying something already written.

Kako leaned forward. "Not original."

Uma gasped. "Copied!"

Sue pointed. "Reproduced instruction."

Oobi blinked. "Copy Tommy?"

The Boss spoke, steady and clear. "The pattern didn't start with the note."

"It learned the note," Kako finished.

The air shifted.

At the top of the wall—

A faint flicker.

Listening again.

Always listening.

Moppy looked uneasy. "It's learning from us too, isn't it?"

No one answered right away.

Because they all knew—

Yes.

Tab 14

Part II - The Shape of a Beginning

"Then we need the *first* Tommy," Sue said firmly. "The original source."

Kako nodded. "The beginning of the pattern."

Uma added, "The moment it started."

Oobi said simply, "...First."

The Boss looked toward the playground.

Not at the equipment.

Not at the wall.

But at the *space between them*.

"Where do habits begin?" he asked.

Ol' Blue Eyes smiled faintly. "Usually with something small."

The Mime Employee mimed a tiny action.

Throwing something.

Casually.

Once.

Then again.

Then again.

Each time easier.

Each time less noticed.

Uma's eyes widened. "Someone kept throwing things."

Kako's voice sharpened. "And the pattern learned from repetition."

Sue added, "Unsupervised repetition."

Moppy looked around the playground.

At the swing.

At the slide.

At the sandbox.

"...Kids play here," she said softly.

Oobi looked at the wall.

"...Throw," he whispered.

The neighbor's voice came again, quieter this time. "...Yeah. That tracks."

Everyone froze.

"...What?" Uma said.

"...There used to be a kid," the neighbor added. "A while ago. Threw stuff over the wall all the time. Toys, junk, whatever. I yelled a lot."

Sue muttered, "I believe that."

"...Name was..." the neighbor paused.

The air tightened.

The wall seemed to lean closer.

"...Tommy," he finished.

Silence.

Heavy.

Clear.

Real.

Oobi's eyes widened. "Tommy!"

Kako's voice was steady. "A real origin point."

Uma whispered, "He started it..."

Moppy added, "But he's not here anymore."

Ol' Blue Eyes looked at the wall. "Doesn't mean the habit left."

The Boss nodded. "Patterns outlast their creators."

Sue crossed her arms. "Of course they do. That's why we manage them."

The Mime Employee slowly mimed something important.

A child throwing a toy.

Laughing.

Forgetting it.

Turning away.

Then—

The invisible pattern catching the action.

Repeating it.

Learning it.

Growing.

Oobi watched carefully.

"...Tommy gone," he said.

"But throwing stayed," Kako finished.

The shape above the wall flickered again.

Stronger now.

More defined.

As if hearing its own story had given it shape.

Moppy stepped closer to Uma. "It's not just taking things..."

"It's continuing something," Uma said.

Sue's voice sharpened. "Then we stop the pattern."

The Boss looked at all of them. "You don't just stop a pattern."

They waited.

"You replace it."

Oobi blinked. "...Replace?"

Ol' Blue Eyes nodded. "Give it something new to learn."

Kako's eyes lit up. "A new rule."

Uma smiled slightly. "A better game."

Moppy squeezed her hand. "One that doesn't lose things."

The shape flickered again.

Watching.

Waiting.

Ready to learn.

Oobi stepped forward.

Small.

Certain.

"...No more throw," he said.

The air shifted.

The pattern hesitated.

Just for a second.

Because now—

For the first time—

It had been given a choice.

And the mystery of Tommy...

was no longer just about who he was.

But what he had started.

And what they would do next.

Tab 15

Chapter Twelve: The Case of Tommy (Filed by Peter Policeman)

The playground felt like it had been given homework.

Clues in rows. The note in Kako's careful hands. The wall behaving like it had something to hide. Above it, the pattern flickered, smaller now, like it was waiting to see what they'd decide next.

"Replace the pattern," Sue said, tapping her palm with the file tab. "Clear, efficient, actionable."

Oobi nodded. "No more throw."

Uma added, "New game."

Kako said, "Defined rules."

Moppy squeezed Uma's hand. "Keep things together."

The Boss watched. Ol' Blue Eyes listened to the quiet. The Mime Employee held his invisible boundary like a steady picture frame.

Then—

A whistle.

Short. Sharp. Official.

Tweet!

Everyone froze.

Another whistle.

Tweet!

From the side of the playground, a figure stepped into view, posture straight, hat just right, presence unmistakably... procedural.

Peter Policeman.

He didn't rush. He didn't hesitate. He simply *arrived* in a way that suggested he had always been meant to.

"Alright, alright," he said, voice firm but friendly. "What's all this, then? I heard reports of... unusual activity."

Sue stepped forward instantly. "Finally. An authority figure."

Peter nodded politely. "That would be me."

Oobi waved. "Hi!"

Peter gave a small smile. "Hello there."

Uma leaned in. "We have a mystery!"

Kako added, "With multiple variables."

Moppy said softly, "And someone named Tommy."

Peter's expression shifted—interested now.

"Tommy, eh?" he said. "Alright. Let's have a look."

He walked over to the arranged clues, hands behind his back, observing like a detective who preferred thinking before talking.

"...Hmm."

He looked at the button.

"...Hmm."

The file tab.

"...Hmm."

The note.

He paused there.

"...Aha."

Sue brightened. "You see it?"

Peter nodded slowly. "I see... a message."

Kako said, "Instructional."

Uma added, "Suspicious."

Oobi said, "Throw."

Peter crouched slightly, reading the note again.

"'Throw over the neighbor's walls – Tommy,'" he repeated. "Right."

He stood.

Turned.

Looked at the wall.

Then at the neighbor's side.

Then back at the group.

"Question one," he said. "Do we have a confirmed Tommy?"

Kako answered, "Yes. Past presence. According to the neighbor."

The neighbor shouted, "VERY REAL, VERY ANNOYING!"

Peter nodded. "Good. Witness confirmation."

Sue crossed her arms. "We've already established that."

Peter smiled slightly. "Of course you have."

He continued, "Question two. Is Tommy still present?"

Silence.

Moppy shook her head. "I don't think so."

Ol' Blue Eyes added quietly, "Not in the usual sense."

The Boss said, "The pattern remains."

Peter tapped his chin. "Right. So we're dealing with a *missing origin* but an *active effect*."

Kako nodded. "Exactly."

Peter looked pleased. "Good. That narrows things down."

Oobi blinked. "...Down?"

"To a case," Peter said.

He straightened.

Took a small notepad from... somewhere. No one saw where.

Clicked a pen.

"Case of Tommy," he announced. "Objective: determine identity, status, and impact."

Sue nodded approvingly. "Finally, some structure."

Peter pointed at the note. "Primary evidence: written instruction."

Then at the scattered items. "Secondary evidence: displaced objects."

Then at the wall. "Tertiary factor: transfer boundary."

Then—

He looked up.

At the flickering shape.

"Unidentified participant," he said.

The shape flickered harder, like it didn't like being labeled.

Oobi pointed. "There!"

Peter squinted. "...Yes. There indeed."

Uma asked, "Can you catch it?"

Peter chuckled lightly. "Not everything can be caught the usual way."

Kako said, "It's a pattern."

Peter nodded. "Then we treat it like one."

Sue crossed her arms. "Which means?"

Peter flipped a page on his notepad. "We ask: what started it, what keeps it going, and what stops it."

The Boss nodded slightly. "Good questions."

Ol' Blue Eyes smiled. "He's got the rhythm."

The Mime Employee mimed applause. Silent, but enthusiastic.

Peter continued, "We know what started it. A boy named Tommy throwing things over the wall."

The neighbor shouted, "TOO MANY THINGS!"

"Duly noted," Peter replied.

"We know what keeps it going," he added. "Repetition. Habit. Lack of attention."

Kako nodded. "Correct."

Peter tapped his pen once. "So now the important part..."

He looked at Oobi.

"...What stops it?"

Oobi held the Grampu piece tight.

"...See," he said.

Uma added, "Pay attention."

Kako said, "Define the rule."

Sue finished, "Control the system."

Moppy whispered, "Keep things together."

Peter smiled.

"There we go."

He wrote something down.

Then stepped closer to the wall.

The shape flickered again.

Watching him now.

Measuring.

Peter spoke clearly, like reading out a report:

"This pattern, referred to as 'Tommy,' is not a person currently present, but a learned behavior. It repeats actions based on prior input. It can be influenced."

The shape pulsed.

Listening.

Peter continued:

"Therefore, we introduce a new rule."

The air tightened.

Even the playground stilled.

Oobi stepped forward beside him.

"...No more throw," Oobi said.

Peter nodded. "Exactly."

Uma added, "Keep things here."

Kako: "No crossing without permission."

Sue: "All items accounted for."

Moppy: "Stay together."

The Mime Employee reinforced the invisible boundary.

Ol' Blue Eyes watched for movement.

The Boss observed, calm and steady.

Peter raised his hand slightly.

"New rule established," he said.

The shape flickered wildly—

Then slowed.

Then—

Paused.

Completely.

For a long moment...

Nothing moved.

Nothing shifted.

Nothing disappeared.

Oobi smiled. "Stay."

Peter lowered his hand.

"...Good work," he said.

Sue allowed a small nod. "Efficient resolution."

Kako exhaled. "Stabilized."

Uma laughed softly. "We did it!"

Moppy smiled, still holding on.

But then—

Very faintly—

The shape flickered again.

Not gone.

Not stopped.

Just... quieter.

Peter noticed immediately.

"...Not finished," he said.

The Boss nodded. "Patterns rarely are."

Ol' Blue Eyes added, "But now it's listening."

Oobi looked up.

"...We teach," he said.

Peter smiled.

"Exactly."

And somewhere between the wall, the playground, and the quiet spaces in between...

the case of Tommy shifted.

No longer just a mystery to solve.

But a pattern to change.

One rule at a time.

Tab 16

Chapter Thirteen: Sue Worrellman, Professional (Mostly

The playground was quieter now.

Not safe, exactly. The shape still flickered faintly above the wall like a stubborn thought that refused to be filed away. But it was listening. That changed everything.

Peter Policeman tucked away his notepad. "The case is active, but stable."

"Stable is acceptable," Sue said briskly.

The Boss stood near the wall, hands folded behind his back, studying the pattern with the calm of someone reading a report no one else could see.

Sue studied him.

Not obviously.

At least, not in a way *she* thought was obvious.

Uma noticed immediately.

Moppy noticed too.

Oobi noticed... that Sue was standing very straight.

Kako noticed everything.

Sue cleared her throat. "Sir, your observational methodology was extremely efficient."

The Boss glanced at her. "Thank you, Sue."

That was all.

Two words.

Perfectly ordinary.

But they hit Sue like a stack of papers tossed into a ceiling fan.

"Y-you're welcome," she said, suddenly reorganizing herself from the inside out.

Uma whispered to Moppy, "She likes him."

Moppy whispered back, "A lot."

The Mime Employee mimed a giant heart and then pretended it exploded into confetti.

Sue spun around. "I saw that."

The Mime Employee shrugged silently.

Ol' Blue Eyes hid a small smile.

Peter Policeman adjusted his hat with diplomatic neutrality.

The neighbor shouted from over the wall, "IS THIS STILL A MYSTERY OR DID IT TURN INTO A ROMANCE?"

Sue snapped, "BOTH, APPARENTLY!"

Then she turned back toward the Boss.

He was kneeling beside the scattered clues, aligning the button, the file tab, and Tommy's note into a neat row.

Sue's eyes widened.

"You... alphabetized them," she breathed.

The Boss looked up. "It seemed appropriate."

If Sue had been a cartoon, steam would have come out of her ears in the shape of hearts.

"That," she said, clutching her hands, "is the most competent thing I have ever seen."

The Boss gave a modest nod. "Organization helps reveal patterns."

Sue swayed slightly.

Kako leaned toward Oobi. "Sue appears to be experiencing a strong emotional response."

Oobi nodded. "Boss."

"Yes," Kako said. "Very Boss."

Uma grinned. "Super Boss."

The shape above the wall flickered as if even it were trying to understand this development.

Moppy squeezed Uma's hand. "Do you think it can feel love?"

"Probably not," said Sue quickly.

The Boss stood.

He turned to the group. "The pattern has stabilized, but it is still adaptable. We must remain consistent."

Sue looked at him like he had personally invented consistency.

"Remain consistent," she repeated dreamily.

Peter Policeman coughed politely. "Excellent advice."

The Boss continued, "Every action teaches it. Every overlooked detail becomes part of its behavior."

Sue nodded far too enthusiastically. "Yes. Absolutely. I agree with everything you say forever."

There was a pause.

Sue froze.

"...Professionally," she added.

Uma giggled.

Moppy giggled.

Oobi smiled.

The Mime Employee pretended to swoon onto an invisible couch.

"I SAW THAT TOO!" Sue barked.

The neighbor shouted, "I CAN'T SEE IT BUT I SUPPORT IT!"

Even Peter Policeman's mustache seemed amused.

The Boss, however, remained calm.

Though perhaps... just perhaps... the corner of his mouth lifted the tiniest amount.

He stepped closer to Sue and handed her the blue file tab.

"Would you keep track of this?" he asked.

Sue accepted it as though it were a royal medal.

"Of course," she said softly.

Their fingers touched.

Just for a moment.

Sue's eyes widened.

The world did not blink.

The wall did not shift.

The mystery itself seemed to politely wait.

Because some moments deserve their own little spotlight.

Oobi looked up at Uma. "Sue smile."

Uma nodded. "A very big smile."

Kako corrected, "A carefully controlled smile."

Moppy whispered, "Not that controlled."

The Boss turned back to the wall.

"We continue," he said.

Sue clutched the file tab to her chest.

"We certainly do," she replied, standing a full inch taller.

The shape above the wall flickered once, almost like a curious wink.

Maybe it had learned something new.

Not just rules.

Not just patterns.

But the strange and powerful way that one calm voice and a neatly organized clue could make Sue Worrellman's heart file itself under:

Boss. 💙📁✨

Tab 17

Chapter Fourteen: Moppy and the Sea Lion Dance

The moment between Sue and the Boss hung in the air like a carefully labeled file folder marked **IMPORTANT**.

Sue still held the blue tab to her chest.

The Boss stood calmly beside the wall, focused on the mystery.

For one quiet second, everything seemed perfectly arranged.

Then Moppy got an idea.

Not a dangerous idea.

Not a mystery-solving idea.

A Moppy idea.

Her eyes brightened. "I know what this moment needs."

Kako looked wary. "I suspect I will disagree."

Uma grinned instantly. "A dance!"

Oobi bounced. "Dance!"

Moppy stepped into the center of the playground, right between Sue and the Boss.

Sue blinked. "Excuse me?"

Moppy struck a determined pose. "I'm doing the Sea Lion!"

"The what?" asked Peter Policeman.

"The dance everyone's doing!" Uma explained.

Ol' Blue Eyes nodded thoughtfully, as if he had seen stranger things. He definitely had.

The Mime Employee silently mimed applause and opened an invisible stage curtain.

The neighbor yelled from over the wall, "IF THIS INVOLVES THROWING ANYTHING OVER THE WALL, I OBJECT!"

"No throwing!" Oobi assured him.

Moppy began.

Now, Moppy was a hand puppet.

And hands, while wonderfully expressive, are not naturally built for elaborate dance moves involving hips, knees, and dramatic body rolls.

But Moppy did not let this stop her.

She wiggled.

She flopped.

She rotated her wrist with heroic commitment.

She bounced from side to side like an enthusiastic orange noodle.

"Sea lion! Sea lion!" Uma cheered.

Oobi joined in. "Sea lion! Sea lion!"

Peter Policeman tried not to laugh and failed with remarkable professionalism.

Ol' Blue Eyes smiled.

The Boss raised one eyebrow, clearly intrigued.

Sue stared.

Not at Moppy.

At the fact that Moppy was performing a full dance directly in front of what had been, moments earlier, the most romantically organized exchange of Sue's life.

Moppy attempted the grand finale.

She swung one side dramatically.

Lost her balance.

Spun in an accidental circle.

And gently bonked into Sue.

Sue stumbled forward.

Straight into the Boss.

There was a collective gasp.

The Boss caught her effortlessly.

One hand steady at her side.

The other keeping her from tipping over entirely.

For a second, Sue forgot every word she had ever known.

The blue file tab nearly slipped from her grasp.

"Careful," the Boss said.

Two syllables.

Devastating.

Sue's face turned the color of a red stapler.

"Y-yes, sir," she stammered.

Moppy froze mid-wiggle.

Uma covered her mouth, trying not to squeal.

Kako adjusted his imaginary glasses despite not wearing any.

"Unexpected but statistically significant," he whispered.

Oobi grinned. "Boss catch Sue!"

Peter Policeman jotted in his notebook:

Secondary incident: romantic escalation.

The Mime Employee mimed fireworks.

The neighbor shouted, "DID SOMEBODY FALL IN LOVE OVER THERE?"

Sue, still supported by the Boss, squeaked, "NO COMMENT!"

The Boss gently helped her stand upright.

She straightened her posture at once, though her knees seemed to be having their own private meeting.

"Thank you," she said quietly.

The Boss nodded. "You're welcome."

Again.

Two words.

Enough to send Sue's thoughts spinning like Moppy's dance.

Moppy clasped her fingers together. "My work here is done."

Sue turned sharply. "Your work nearly caused a workplace incident!"

Moppy smiled innocently. "But a romantic workplace incident."

Sue opened her mouth to object.

Paused.

Then hugged the file tab tighter.

"...That is not entirely inaccurate."

The shape above the wall flickered once, as if it too appreciated a well-timed plot development.

Oobi clapped. "Dance help!"

Uma laughed. "Best dance ever."

Kako nodded. "Surprisingly effective."

Ol' Blue Eyes folded his arms. "Sometimes the shortest route between two people is an accidental collision."

Peter Policeman added, "I'll allow it."

The Boss turned back to the mystery, calm as ever.

But as he did, he glanced at Sue.

Just briefly.

And Sue, noticing, nearly melted into a perfectly organized puddle.

The playground creaked softly.

The wall remained still.

And for one shining moment, between mysteries and missing pieces and strange patterns named Tommy, there was laughter.

And perhaps...

the beginning of something even Sue Worrellman could not fully file away.

Tab 18

Chapter Fifteen: Inka and the Frozen Clue

The playground had become a very unusual headquarters.

On one side stood the Neighbor's wall, still suspicious. Above it flickered the restless pattern once sparked by Tommy's endless toy-tossing. On the other side, swings creaked softly, as if whispering playground gossip.

In the middle of it all, Sue Worrellman was trying very hard to look professional and not think about how gracefully the Boss had caught her.

She was failing, but in a highly organized way.

Oobi held the small piece of Grampu close.

"Find Grampu," he said.

Uma squeezed Moppy's hand. "And keep everybody together."

Kako studied the clues. "We're still missing a major connection."

Peter Policeman tapped his notebook. "Every mystery has a witness."

Ol' Blue Eyes added, "Or someone waiting to be found."

The Mime Employee pointed toward the far end of the playground.

Near the swings, where the grass turned pale and frosty, something shimmered into view.

At first it looked like a snowdrift.

Then it moved.

A familiar voice, gentle and musical, drifted through the chilly air.

"Hello...?"

Oobi gasped. "Inka!"

There stood **Inka**, wrapped in her usual wintry grace. Tiny flakes of frost sparkled around her like confetti from a snow globe. She looked worried, but relieved to see them.

"Oobi! Uma! Kako!"

Oobi rushed over. "Inka!"

Inka knelt and hugged him warmly. "I have been looking everywhere."

Uma stepped forward. "We found Moppy, and pieces of Grampu."

At Grampu's name, Inka's expression softened. She placed a hand over her heart.

"Grampu..." she whispered. "I knew something was wrong. I could feel him fading, like a song growing quieter."

Moppy nodded. "That's exactly what happened."

Peter Policeman flipped to a fresh page. "Relationship noted."

Sue blinked. "Relationship?"

Inka smiled shyly, frost glittering at her fingertips. "Grampu and I have become very close."

Oobi tilted his head. "Girlfriend."

Inka blushed, as much as a snow queen can blush. "Yes. In this story... I suppose so."

From the other side of the wall, the Neighbor shouted, "GOOD FOR THEM!"

Even Sue smiled.

The Boss gave an approving nod. "A meaningful connection can strengthen memory."

Kako's eyes widened. "Of course. Emotional bonds create stronger anchors."

Ol' Blue Eyes added, "The things that matter most are hardest to erase."

Inka reached into her mitten and revealed a small object.

A silver snowflake charm.

"I found this where Grampu's voice disappeared," she said.

Oobi stared at it. "Grampu clue!"

The charm twinkled, and the piece Oobi held began to glow softly.

The two fragments resonated, like old friends recognizing one another.

Moppy gasped. "They fit together!"

The Mime Employee mimed two puzzle pieces clicking into place.

Sue straightened. "Excellent. Additional evidence."

But Inka looked past them, toward the wall.

Her calm face grew serious.

"It is watching," she said.

The shape above the wall flickered, reacting to her words.

For a moment, it seemed less threatening and more uncertain.

As if Inka's steady presence chilled its confidence.

Inka took Oobi's hand. "We will bring Grampu back."

Oobi nodded firmly. "Together."

Uma, Kako, Moppy, Peter Policeman, Sue, the Boss, Ol' Blue Eyes, and even the Mime Employee gathered closer.

The Neighbor called over the wall, "AND ME, EMOTIONALLY!"

Everyone laughed.

The snowflake charm and the Grampu fragment glowed brighter, casting soft light across the playground.

For the first time, they had more than clues.

They had someone who loved Grampu deeply.

Someone whose connection might help guide them to the missing pieces.

Inka looked toward the shifting air above the wall, her voice calm and certain.

"You may scatter memories," she said, "but love remembers where they belong."

The pattern flickered.

Hesitated.

And drew back slightly.

Oobi squeezed Inka's hand.

"Find Grampu," he said again.

But now the words felt warmer.

Stronger.

Because with Inka beside them, they weren't just searching for a missing friend.

They were following a trail of love through the mystery. ❄️💙👴✨

Tab 19

Chapter Sixteen: The Gathering of Unusual Hands

The playground had become crowded with clues, feelings, and at least one ongoing office romance.

Oobi stood at the center, holding Grampu's fragment in one hand and Inka's snowflake charm in the other. Together, they glowed like two puzzle pieces calling across a foggy distance.

"Find Grampu," Oobi said.

"Find Grampu," everyone echoed.

The wall rumbled.

Not loudly.

More like a throat clearing before a very important announcement.

The bricks shimmered, and a hidden gate appeared in the center. It swung open to reveal a moonlit backyard unlike any they had seen before.

A crooked shed leaned at the far end like it was keeping a hundred secrets. Wind chimes clinked. Garden tools stood at attention. The air smelled faintly of pizza, letters, and mystery.

"New place!" Oobi cheered.

From the shadows stepped **Bertha**, Grampu's bandana-wearing bestie. Bertha

She wore a bright bandana and carried herself with the confidence of someone who had seen every weird thing a backyard could offer.

"About time y'all got here," Bertha said. "Grampu's in trouble, and trouble always sends for friends."

Inka rushed forward. "Bertha!"

Bertha hugged her warmly. "Don't you worry, snowflake. We'll get him back."

Then a slow clap echoed from the fence.

"Well now," drawled a deep Southern voice. "Ain't this a sweet little rescue party."

Perched on the fence was **Wyatt Walls**. Wyatt Walls His orange eyes glowed like jack-o'-lanterns, and his smile was all sharp corners.

"Name's Wyatt Walls," he said. "And I'd be mighty pleased if y'all stopped pokin' around my business."

Sue folded her arms. "Absolutely not."

Wyatt tipped an imaginary hat. "Figured you'd say that."

A flash of pink appeared beside him.

"Oh, ignore Wyatt," purred **Lizzie**. Lizzie Her pink eyes sparkled with greedy delight as she scooped up loose clues. "I'm only interested in whatever's valuable."

"Put those down!" Sue snapped.

Lizzie hugged the clues tighter. "Finders keepers."

A small voice piped up from behind Oobi.

"Um... hi."

There stood **Jonathan**. Jonathan A kid hand puppet with upside-down blue eyes that made him look permanently puzzled and surprisingly observant.

"I saw Tommy once," Jonathan said quietly.

Everyone turned.

Peter Policeman nearly dropped his notebook.

"You did?" Uma asked.

Jonathan nodded. "He used to toss toys over the wall and laugh. But one day he said the wall started throwing things back."

A hush fell over the yard.

Then the shed door exploded open.

"DID SOMEBODY ORDER HELP?"

Out burst **BBJ (Bob Billy Joe)**. BBJ (Bob Billy Joe)

He wore three hats at once, a pizza apron, a mailbag, and a tool belt.

Behind him came more BBJs.

Mailman BBJ with envelopes.

Pizza Guy BBJ with a steaming box.

Construction BBJ carrying a tiny hammer.

Possibly Dentist BBJ, though no one asked.

"BBJ?" Oobi shouted.

"ALL OF ME!" BBJ replied proudly.

The Mime Employee silently applauded with astonishing speed.

Ol' Blue Eyes nodded. "That shed contains more career paths than a guidance counselor."

BBJ slapped a pizza box onto the ground and opened it dramatically.

Inside was not pizza.

It was a map.

A winding diagram of the playground, the wall, the office, the basement, and at the very center:

A circle labeled **THE LOST PLACE**.

Wyatt Walls hissed.

Lizzie dropped her stolen clues.

Jonathan pointed to the map with his upside-down blue eyes focused perfectly.

"That's where Tommy went."

The Grampu fragment and Inka's snowflake charm flared with light.

The shape above the wall flickered wildly.

Sue stepped beside the Boss, shoulders squared.

Peter Policeman opened a fresh case file.

Bertha tightened her bandana.

BBJ and his job variants saluted.

Oobi looked at all of them, his tiny hand trembling with determination.

"...Find Grampu."

The words echoed across the backyard.

And for the first time, their search had become a full-blown hand-puppet coalition, equal parts mystery squad and chaotic family reunion.

Somewhere beyond the wall, beyond the office, beyond the places where forgotten things drifted, the Lost Place was waiting.

And with Bertha, Wyatt Walls, Lizzie, Jonathan, and the entire improbable BBJ workforce now in the adventure, the final journey was about to become bigger, stranger, and far more crowded than anyone had imagined. 🧡❄️📁🍕🕵️✨

Tab 20

Chapter Seventeen: Palmer and the Clipboard of Destiny

The backyard hummed with new energy.

Bertha adjusted her bandana. Wyatt Walls lounged on the fence with a grin like a cracked pumpkin. Lizzie eyed every shiny object as if deciding which one would fit best in her imaginary treasure vault. Jonathan stood quietly, his upside-down blue eyes taking in details no one else noticed. BBJ and his many professional variants swarmed around the map, arguing over whether the Lost Place required pizza delivery, certified mail, or both.

At the center of it all, Oobi held Grampu's fragment and Inka's snowflake charm.

"Find Grampu," he said.

The words had become more than a goal. They were a drumbeat.

Then came the sound of brisk footsteps and the unmistakable scratch of a pen on a clipboard.

"Okay, okay, everyone, let's maintain some order here."

A new figure hurried into the yard, tie slightly crooked, expression caught between determination and mild panic.

It was **Palmer**. Palmer

He carried a clipboard so full of notes that extra papers fluttered behind him like startled pigeons.

Sue straightened immediately. "Palmer!"

Palmer adjusted his tie and looked around at the ever-growing crowd of hands, clues, and career-themed BBJs.

"I left the office for ten minutes," he said, "and now there appears to be a supernatural task force in a backyard."

"That is an accurate summary," Kako replied.

Palmer scribbled on his clipboard.

"Good. Accurate summaries are helpful."

He marched over to the map and began organizing.

"Team One: clue analysis. Team Two: perimeter monitoring. Team Three: pizza logistics."

Pizza Guy BBJ saluted enthusiastically.

"The Lost Place," Palmer muttered, tracing the circle on the map. "Unstable, unpredictable, likely under-resourced."

Sue watched with shining eyes.

"He's very efficient," she whispered to the Boss.

The Boss nodded. "Competence is contagious."

Sue nearly levitated.

Palmer looked up. "Our objective is straightforward. Recover Grampu, identify Tommy's final location, and prevent further displacement of important individuals and objects."

Peter Policeman tapped his notebook. "Excellent case management."

Bertha grinned. "I like this fella."

Jonathan raised a finger. "The pattern reacts when people pay attention."

Palmer scribbled again. "Then attention is now a required deliverable."

The Mime Employee silently mimed a check mark in the air.

Wyatt Walls chuckled from the fence. "Well now, y'all sure know how to turn a haunting into a staff meeting."

Lizzie rolled her pink eyes. "As long as there's treasure at the end."

Palmer ignored both comments with the practiced endurance of a seasoned office worker.

He turned to Oobi and knelt so they were eye level.

"Oobi," he said kindly, "you've done the most important thing already."

Oobi blinked. "Find?"

Palmer smiled. "You noticed something was wrong and kept going. That's how every big problem gets solved."

Oobi thought about this and nodded solemnly.

"Keep find."

"Exactly," Palmer said.

He stood and clipped a new page onto his board.

"Action plan," he announced. "We follow the map to the Lost Place. We stay together. We protect every clue."

Inka held Grampu's snowflake charm tighter.

Bertha tightened her bandana.

Peter Policeman checked his whistle.

Palmer drew a neat box on his clipboard and wrote:

MISSION READY.

The shape above the wall flickered as if uneasy about this new level of organization.

Sue smiled. "I almost feel bad for it."

"Almost," Kako said.

Palmer pointed toward the glowing circle on the map.

"Then let's move."

The shed doors creaked open. The path to the Lost Place shimmered beyond.

Oobi stepped forward, his friends and allies forming an ever-growing line behind him.

He looked back at everyone, from the Boss and Sue to BBJ and his improbable workforce.

"...Find Grampu," he said once more.

And with Palmer's clipboard leading the way, the grandest hand-puppet rescue mission ever assembled marched toward the mystery at the center of everything. 📋✨🕵️🍕❄️💙

Tab 21

Chapter Eighteen: The Parade of Perfectly Unhelpful Help

The path to the Lost Place shimmered ahead like a ribbon of moonlight and office memos. Palmer marched at the front, clipboard held high. Oobi followed with Grampu's fragment glowing in one hand and Inka's snowflake charm sparkling in the other.

Behind them came a grand and deeply improbable procession.

Sue and the Boss walked side by side, which Sue pretended not to notice while noticing it with the intensity of a thousand color-coded spreadsheets. Kako analyzed every step. Uma and Moppy whispered excitedly. Peter Policeman updated his case notes. Bertha adjusted her bandana. Jonathan's upside-down blue eyes scanned for hidden clues. BBJ and his career variants debated whether the Lost Place needed mail service, pizza delivery, or both.

Then the path widened.

And a colorful van screeched to a stop in a burst of confetti and squeaky brakes.

The side door flew open.

Out leapt **Skittles McDove**. Skittles McDove

He landed in a dramatic pose, somehow wearing sunglasses despite it being nighttime.

"Team chaos reporting for duty!" he announced with electric enthusiasm.

Behind him stepped **Candy Cool**. Candy Cool

Stylish, calm, and perfectly put together, she adjusted her scarf and surveyed the group with reassuring confidence.

"Don't worry," she said smoothly. "We brought snacks and emotional stability."

Next came **Connie Confused**. Connie Confused

She stumbled out, looked at the moon, and asked, "Wait... are we at the dentist?"

"No," everyone said.

"Oh," Connie replied. "Then where's my shoe?"

A lanky teen leaned against the van door.

It was **James McFord**. James McFord

He folded his fingers and smirked.

"Great," he said. "A haunted wall, an office crush, and a hundred puppets. Totally normal Tuesday."

Finally, the van emitted a series of beeps.

BEEP. WHIRR. CLANK.

Rolling down a tiny ramp came **Babyinator**. Babyinator

His eyes glowed softly as he extended mechanical fingers.

"BABY MANAGEMENT SYSTEM ONLINE," he declared. "OBJECTIVE: KEEP BABIES IN CHECK."

Oobi clapped. "Robot!"

Uma cheered. "Cool!"

The babies in the group, though none were entirely sure which characters counted as babies anymore, seemed instinctively better behaved.

Sue blinked as another familiar face stepped out of the van.

"Frankie!" she exclaimed.

There stood **Frankie**. Frankie

Sue's co-worker waved cheerfully.

"Hey, Sue! Heard you were solving a mystery with your boss."

Sue turned bright red. "That is a gross oversimplification."

Frankie glanced at the Boss, then back at Sue, and grinned knowingly.

"Sure it is."

The Boss remained composed, though even he seemed to accept that the secret was no secret at all.

Skittles McDove hopped onto BBJ's pizza box map.

"Listen up, hand heroes! We're here to turbocharge this rescue with style, organization, and occasional confusion!"

Connie raised her finger. "Which one am I?"

"Confusion," James replied dryly.

Candy Cool knelt beside Oobi and smiled. "You've built quite a team."

Oobi nodded proudly. "Find Grampu."

Babyinator scanned the glowing clues.

"MISSION STATUS: HIGHLY ADORABLE. SUCCESS PROBABILITY INCREASING."

Palmer scribbled furiously. "Additional personnel integrated."

Peter Policeman added, "Excellent support network."

Wyatt Walls tipped his hat from the fence. "Y'all are collectin' teammates faster than I collect grudges."

Lizzie's pink eyes sparkled. "And hopefully treasure."

The path to the Lost Place glowed brighter, as if reacting to the ever-growing alliance.

Skittles McDove spread his fingers dramatically.

"Then what are we waiting for? Adventure doesn't punch the clock!"

Sue looked at the Boss.

The Boss looked at the path.

Frankie elbowed Sue.

Sue pretended that did not happen.

Oobi stepped to the front, tiny but determined, with a crowd of friends stretching farther than he could count.

He lifted Grampu's fragment high.

"Find Grampu!"

The cry echoed through the backyard.

And with Skittles McDove's wild energy, Candy Cool's steady calm, Connie Confused's accidental comedy, James McFord's sarcasm, Babyinator's robotic efficiency, and Frankie's office expertise, the rescue team became even stranger, stronger, and more wonderfully crowded than before.
🚐✨🤖🍬📋💙

Tab 22

Chapter Nineteen: The Neighbor's Absolutely Terrible Night

The grand rescue team marched toward the Lost Place in a glorious parade of hands, clues, snowflakes, robots, office workers, and at least six versions of BBJ.

Everything was going surprisingly well.

Too well.

And that is usually when Moppy gets an idea.

The Secret Toss

While everyone was focused on Palmer's clipboard briefing, Moppy quietly tiptoed to the growing pile of miscellaneous objects.

Buttons.

Paper clips.

Toy cars.

Pizza Guy BBJ's spare pepperoni.

A rubber duck.

Three socks that belonged to nobody.

A stapler.

A kazoo.

Connie Confused's shoe.

"Hey!" Connie said. "I found my shoe! Wait... where did it go?"

Moppy grinned.

"This is going to be hilarious."

One by one, she began tossing everything over the Neighbor's wall.

Boing!
Thunk!
Squeak!
Kazooot!
Stap!
Pepperoni!

Then she found Tommy's orange baby toy.

She threw that too.

Then, for reasons no one could explain, Mailman BBJ accidentally handed her a sack of loose mail.

Over the wall it went.

Finally, she tossed a lawn flamingo.

Because why not?

The Explosion of Yelling

For one glorious second, all was silent.

Then—

"WHAT IN THE NAME OF PROPERTY RIGHTS IS HAPPENING OVER HERE?!"

The Neighbor burst through a hidden gate in his wall like an enraged jack-in-the-box.

His hair was wild.

Leaves clung to him.

He wore Connie's shoe on one hand.

A pepperoni slice was stuck to his forehead.

And the lawn flamingo was balanced on his shoulder like a furious pink parrot.

Behind him, dozens of letters fluttered into the night sky.

The entire team froze.

Oobi blinked. "Neighbor."

The Neighbor pointed accusingly.

"THIS! THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT TOMMY USED TO DO!"

Moppy gave a tiny wave.

"Hi."

The Neighbor's eye twitched.

"MOPPY."

Chaos Multiplies

The shape above the wall suddenly flickered brighter than ever.

Tommy's pattern had noticed.

The more objects flew over the wall, the stronger it became.

The air crackled.

Toys floated.

Paperclips spun like metallic fireflies.

Babyinator beeped frantically.

"WARNING: CHAOS LEVEL EXCEEDING ACCEPTABLE BABY PARAMETERS."

Skittles McDove jumped onto the pizza box map.

"THIS IS THE BEST NIGHT OF MY LIFE!"

Candy Cool pulled him back. "Please remain moderately calm."

James McFord folded his fingers. "Sure. Let's feed the haunted wall. Brilliant."

Connie Confused looked around. "Are we bowling?"

"No!" everyone shouted.

Wyatt Walls cackled from the fence. "Now *this* is entertainment."

Lizzie tried to collect the flying objects in a sack labeled STUFF.

Peter Policeman blew his whistle so hard his hat tilted sideways.

Sue gasped in horror.

"UNAUTHORIZED ITEM TRANSFER!"

Palmer nearly dropped his clipboard.

"My whole plan has bullet points!"

Sue Goes Full Sue

Sue turned toward Moppy, eyes blazing with administrative fury.

"MOPPY! DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT YOU'VE DONE?"

Moppy shrank slightly.

"...A very funny thing?"

"No!"

The Boss stepped forward calmly.

"Sue."

She froze.

"Yes, sir?"

"Breathe."

Sue inhaled deeply.

"Thank you, sir."

Then she turned back to Moppy.

"After we save Grampu, you are attending a mandatory seminar on appropriate wall etiquette."

Moppy nodded sheepishly.

"Fair."

The Neighbor Joins the Team

The Neighbor looked around at the floating debris, glowing wall, and expanding supernatural crisis.

His anger softened.

Just a little.

"...This is bigger than my yard, isn't it?"

Oobi nodded. "Big mystery."

The Neighbor sighed.

Connie's shoe fell off his hand.

The flamingo slid to the ground.

"...Fine," he said. "But if I'm helping, somebody owes me a new mailbox."

Mailman BBJ saluted. "ALREADY ON IT!"

The Neighbor stood beside Oobi.

"Let's finish what Tommy started."

Oobi smiled. "Together."

The Wall Awakens

Above them, Tommy's pattern swelled into its clearest form yet.

A towering, shifting silhouette made of toys, notes, memories, and forgotten things.

Its voice rumbled through the night.

"...MORE..."

The Grampu fragment glowed.

Inka's snowflake charm sparkled.

The map to the Lost Place burned brighter.

The Neighbor cracked his knuckles.

Sue adjusted her file tab.

The Boss stood steady.

And Oobi stepped forward.

"Enough."

For the first time, the pattern hesitated.

Because the chaos had done something unexpected.

It had brought the last person Tommy ever bothered into the fight.

And now, with the Neighbor officially part of the team, the mystery was about to crash through the wall itself. 🧱🦩📋🤖💙✨

Tab 23

Chapter Twenty: The Great Hand-Off Beyond the Wall

The Neighbor's yard was a disaster.

Letters fluttered through the trees like confused birds. A lawn flamingo leaned dramatically against the fence. Connie Confused's shoe was somehow lodged in a birdbath. Above it all, Tommy's pattern shimmered and crackled, larger and louder than ever.

But for the first time, the team had something more powerful than clues.

They had a direction.

The map inside BBJ's pizza box glowed brighter and brighter, its winding lines stretching away from the playground, past the office, beyond the basement, and far beyond the neighborhood itself.

At the center of the map was one destination.

THE LOST PLACE

Oobi held Grampu's fragment tightly.

"Find Grampu," he said.

And everyone nodded.

Packing Up, Hand Style

Since everyone was a hand, preparing for a long journey looked a little different than most adventures.

Sue carefully balanced a file tab, a flashlight, and three emergency sticky notes between her fingers.

The Boss carried the map with impossible steadiness.

Palmer clipped tiny supply lists to everyone who could hold one.

Peter Policeman wore his whistle like a badge of honor.

Inka cradled the glowing snowflake charm.

Bertha tied her bandana tighter.

Moppy stuffed snacks into the space between her fingers.

"Just in case," she said.

Candy Cool packed extra scarves.

James McFord packed attitude.

Connie Confused packed a banana and insisted it was a compass.

Babyinator unfolded tiny mechanical compartments containing juice boxes and spare batteries.

BBJ and his job variants packed pizza, letters, tools, and, for reasons unknown, a trampoline.

Wyatt Walls and Lizzie tagged along with suspicious grins.

Jonathan quietly memorized every detail.

Frankie gave Sue a playful wink.

Skittles McDove somehow packed fireworks, though nobody let him light them.

The Neighbor locked his gate and muttered, "If my yard survives this, it deserves a medal."

Goodbye to the Neighborhood

The moon hung low as the team gathered at the end of the street.

The familiar houses seemed smaller now.

The playground swings creaked one last goodbye.

The office building in the distance glowed softly.

Even the basement window seemed to watch them go.

Oobi turned and waved.

"Bye-bye."

Uma squeezed his hand.

"We'll bring Grampu back."

Inka nodded. "And bring him home."

The Boss studied the map.

"It begins here."

Sue nearly melted at how dramatic and organized he sounded.

"That was incredibly inspiring, sir."

Frankie whispered, "You are down catastrophic."

Sue whispered back, "I know."

The Road to the Unknown

As they stepped beyond the neighborhood, the world began to change.

The sidewalks faded into winding paths of forgotten toys.

Streetlights became giant glowing paper clips.

Mailboxes stood like silent sentries.

The sky shimmered with floating sticky notes and drifting puzzle pieces.

Every step felt like moving deeper into the spaces where lost things waited to be remembered.

Connie Confused looked around nervously.

"Is this still Oklahoma?"

"No one knows," James McFord replied.

Skittles McDove leapt onto a giant crayon.

"Adventure mode activated!"

Babyinator beeped.

"TERRAIN ANALYSIS: 98% WEIRD."

Peter Policeman jotted down: **Jurisdiction uncertain.**

A New Beginning

The glowing fragment in Oobi's hand pulsed warmly.

For a brief moment, they heard Grampu's faint voice on the wind.

"Oobi..."

Oobi's eyes widened.

"Grampu!"

The voice faded, but the direction was clear.

Straight ahead.

Into the Lost Place.

Oobi looked at the endless path stretching before them.

Behind him stood more friends than he ever imagined.

Office workers. Detectives. Dancers. Snow spirits. Robots. Tricksters. Neighbors. Babies. And a small army of career-minded BBJs.

All hands.

All ready.

All together.

Oobi smiled and raised the glowing fragment high.

"Find Grampu!"

The cry echoed across the strange new world.

And with that, the greatest hand-puppet adventure of all left the neighborhood behind and began the long journey into the unknown, where lost memories drifted like stars and Grampu was waiting to be found. ✋🌟❄️📋🕵️🍕🤖💙

Tab 24

Chapter Twenty-One: Dazzlesocks and the Rainbow Trail

The journey beyond the neighborhood had become stranger with every step.

The sidewalks were gone, replaced by winding roads made of puzzle pieces and crayons. Giant paper clips arched overhead like silver trees. Sticky notes fluttered through the sky like yellow butterflies.

And still, the team marched onward.

All hands.

All determined.

All searching for Grampu.

Oobi held the glowing fragment close.

"Find Grampu," he said.

The fragment pulsed warmly in agreement.

A Splash of Color

As the group crossed a bridge made entirely of rulers and rubber bands, something bright caught Uma's eye.

"Look!" she cried.

Ahead, lying in the middle of the path, was a single rainbow-striped sock.

It twitched.

Then bounced.

Then stood upright like it had been waiting for them all along.

The sock waved cheerfully.

"Hiya!"

Oobi gasped. "Sock!"

The rainbow sock spun in a dazzling circle, each stripe glowing with a different color.

"Name's Dazzlesocks," the sock announced. "But everybody calls me Dazzie!"

He struck a heroic pose.

"...Or they will, once we become best friends."

Uma clapped excitedly. "I love Dazzie already!"

Moppy nodded. "Ten out of ten introduction."

James McFord smirked. "A talking sock. Sure. Why not."

Connie Confused squinted.

"Are you my other shoe?"

"Nope!" Dazzie said happily. "But I am foot-adjacent."

Babyinator scanned him.

"SUBJECT ANALYSIS: 100% FABULOUS."

Dazzie bowed. "Correct."

The Rainbow Guide

Dazzie hopped up onto Oobi's hand and examined the glowing Grampu fragment.

"Ooooh," he said. "That's Lost Place magic."

Kako leaned forward. "You recognize it?"

"Recognize it?" Dazzie laughed. "Honey, I've tumble-dried through every corner of the Lost Place."

Sue raised an eyebrow. "That sentence somehow concerns me."

The Boss stepped closer. "Can you guide us?"

Dazzie grinned.

"Absolutely. I know every shortcut, every secret, and every place where one sock mysteriously vanishes."

Lizzie's eyes sparkled. "Is there treasure?"

"Darling," Dazzie said, "the Lost Place is basically a treasure chest with abandonment issues."

Wyatt Walls tipped his hat. "I like this fella."

Bertha smiled. "Any friend of Grampu's friends is a friend of mine."

Inka's snowflake charm twinkled brightly when Dazzie touched it.

The rainbow sock grew serious.

"Grampu's close," he said softly. "I can feel his threads in the wind."

Oobi's eyes widened. "Close?"

Dazzie nodded.

"Very close."

Dazzie's Big Personality

As they resumed walking, Dazzie became the glittery heartbeat of the expedition.

He sang little songs.

He spun dramatically.

He complimented Candy Cool's scarf.

He organized an impromptu conga line with Skittles McDove.

He taught BBJ and his variants how to moonwalk, though none of them had feet.

Even Sue had to admit he was surprisingly efficient.

"I appreciate his morale-boosting capabilities," she said.

The Boss nodded. "He keeps the group cohesive."

Sue blushed.

"Everything you say sounds so competent."

Frankie snorted.

"Everything he says sounds competent to you."

Sue pretended not to hear.

The Rainbow Trail Appears

As night deepened, Dazzie suddenly froze.

His stripes began to glow.

Red.

Orange.

Yellow.

Green.

Blue.

Purple.

A brilliant rainbow path unfurled across the sky like a magical bridge.

Everyone stared in amazement.

Dazzie smiled.

"There it is," he said.

"The Rainbow Trail."

The Grampu fragment shone brighter than ever.

Inka's charm sparkled like fresh snow.

The map inside BBJ's pizza box rearranged itself, pointing directly to the glowing trail.

Peter Policeman adjusted his hat.

"New lead confirmed."

Palmer checked a box on his clipboard.

Candy Cool smiled calmly.

Skittles McDove exploded with excitement.

Connie Confused asked if they were inside a cereal commercial.

The Neighbor looked upward and muttered, "I knew this was going to get weird."

Oobi stepped to the front of the group.

Dazzie perched proudly on his hand, rainbow stripes shimmering.

Oobi raised the glowing fragment.

"Find Grampu!"

The words echoed across the sky.

And with Dazzlesocks, the dazzling rainbow sock known as Dazzie, lighting the way, the team climbed onto the Rainbow Trail and continued toward the Lost Place, closer than ever to the friend they refused to forget.
🌈🧦✨❄️📋💙

Tab 25

Chapter Twenty-Two: The Cave of Forgotten Animations

The Rainbow Trail arched through the sky like a glittering bridge of color and memory.

Dazzie led the way, hopping proudly at the front. Oobi followed close behind, carrying Grampu's glowing fragment. Inka's snowflake charm sparkled beside it, sending tiny icy stars into the air.

The entire team marched onward.

Hands.

Sock.

Robot.

Neighbor.

Office workers.

And far too many BBJs.

"Find Grampu," Oobi said.

"Find Grampu!" everyone echoed.

The Mountain of Lost Things

The Rainbow Trail ended at a jagged mountain rising from the mist.

Its entrance yawned like a giant mouth.

Above the cave, carved into stone, were the words:

ABANDONED MEDIA CAVERN

James McFord shoved his fingers into his pockets.

"Sounds cheerful."

Connie Confused squinted.

"Is this a movie theater?"

"No," said everyone.

Dazzie nodded solemnly.

"This is where forgotten things go when the world moves on."

Oobi tilted his head.

"Lost?"

Dazzie smiled gently.

"Very lost."

The Posters in the Dark

Inside the cave, glowing crystals lit the walls with soft blue light.

The deeper they walked, the stranger the cave became.

Old toys rested on shelves of stone.

Broken crayons lay in colorful piles.

Dusty videotapes slept in corners.

And then Uma gasped.

"Look!"

The cave walls were covered in ancient posters.

Bright, faded posters with familiar red logos and cartoon lightning bolts.

Each one proudly displayed:

Adobe Flash

Some posters showed classic web games.

Some featured animated cartoons.

Some simply read:

KEEP THE INTERNET FUN

Peter Policeman removed his hat respectfully.

"A relic of a bygone era."

Palmer scribbled furiously.

"Historical technology noted."

Skittles McDove pressed his face to one poster.

"I used to spend HOURS here!"

Candy Cool smiled wistfully.

"It was a magical time."

James McFord nodded.

"Peak internet."

Sue adjusted her file tab.

"Outdated, unsupported... yet oddly inspiring."

The Boss placed a hand on one of the posters.

"Some things disappear, but they remain important."

Sue nearly fainted.

"Sir, that was incredibly profound."

Frankie whispered, "And incredibly attractive."

Sue whispered back, "Please stop narrating my feelings."

Grampu's Signal

As they admired the posters, Oobi's fragment began to glow brighter.

Inka's snowflake charm sparkled in response.

The Adobe Flash posters flickered as if powered by ancient code.

Then one poster lit up completely.

It showed a crude cartoon drawing of Grampu waving from the center of a cave.

At the bottom were the words:

LOADING GRANDPA... 78%

Oobi gasped.

"Grampu!"

The whole team rushed forward.

Babyinator beeped.

"TARGET SIGNAL STRENGTH INCREASING."

Jonathan pointed deeper into the cave.

"There."

A hidden tunnel opened behind the glowing poster.

Cold wind rushed outward.

And with it came a faint, familiar voice.

"Oobi..."

Oobi's eyes filled with hope.

"Grampu!"

Into the Loading Zone

The shape of Tommy flickered high above the cave entrance, watching from the shadows.

Wyatt Walls narrowed his orange eyes.

Lizzie clutched her sack of treasures.

Bertha tightened her bandana.

Peter Policeman flipped to a clean page.

Palmer checked **ENTER MYSTERIOUS TUNNEL** off his clipboard.

Dazzie's rainbow stripes glowed brilliantly.

The Neighbor gulped.

"I miss when my biggest problem was junk in my yard."

The Boss unfolded the map.

"This is it."

Sue gazed at him dreamily.

"Yes, sir."

Oobi stepped to the mouth of the hidden tunnel.

The fragment in his hand pulsed like a tiny heart.

He lifted it high.

"Find Grampu!"

The cave echoed with his voice.

And beneath the watchful eyes of ancient Adobe Flash posters, the great hand-and-sock expedition entered the Loading Zone, where forgotten worlds flickered, lost memories buffered, and Grampu waited at 78 percent complete.
🌈🧦💻⛰️❄️📋✨

Tab 26

Chapter Twenty-Three: The Scream in the Loading Zone

The hidden tunnel stretched deep beneath the Abandoned Media Cavern.

Behind them, the ancient Adobe Flash posters flickered and buzzed like old memories trying to stay alive. Ahead, the walls shimmered with strange symbols: buffering circles, progress bars, and glowing icons labeled **SAVE**, **LOAD**, and **RECOVER**.

Oobi held Grampu's fragment close.

It pulsed faster now.

Warmer.

Stronger.

"Grampu close," Oobi whispered.

Inka squeezed his hand.

"Yes," she said softly. "I can feel him."

The whole team moved carefully through the Loading Zone.

Every hand was tense.

Even Dazzie's rainbow stripes dimmed with concentration.

The Sound

Then—

A scream.

Faint.

Far away.

Echoing through the tunnel like a file opening after years of silence.

"AAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHH!"

Everyone froze.

The sound bounced through the cave walls, stretching and warping until it became unmistakably familiar.

"OOBI!"

Oobi gasped.

"Grampu!"

The glowing fragment blazed like a tiny star.

Inka's snowflake charm flared with icy light.

The scream came again, louder this time.

"OOBI! HELP GRAMPU!"

Uma clapped her hands to her mouth.

"That's him!"

Moppy nodded frantically.

"It's definitely Grampu!"

Peter Policeman snapped open his notebook.

"Victim confirmed alive!"

Palmer checked a box so hard his pencil nearly broke.

LOCATED POSSIBLE GRANDPA.

Panic and Determination

Bertha tightened her bandana.

"That's my best friend."

Her voice shook, but her eyes were fierce.

Inka's frosty aura sparkled brighter than ever.

"Hold on, Grampu," she whispered.

Sue turned to the Boss.

"He needs us."

The Boss nodded calmly.

"Then we proceed."

Sue nearly combusted from admiration.

"Yes, sir."

Frankie whispered, "This is your favorite sentence."

Sue whispered back, "Every sentence he says is my favorite sentence."

The Team Reacts

Skittles McDove bounced in place.

"We found him! We found him!"

Candy Cool steadied him.

"Almost."

Connie Confused looked around.

"Who is screaming? Is it me?"

James McFord folded his fingers.

"Probably the guy we're here to rescue."

Babyinator beeped urgently.

"GRANDPA DISTRESS LEVEL: EXTREME."

Jonathan pointed deeper into the tunnel.

"There."

Wyatt Walls narrowed his orange eyes.

"Sounds like trouble, sugar."

Lizzie clutched her treasure sack.

"If Grampu has valuables, I call first look."

"No," everyone said.

BBJ and all his variants saluted.

"RESCUE DELIVERY IN PROGRESS!"

The Neighbor shivered.

"Okay, hearing a screaming grandpa in a cave is officially beyond my comfort zone."

The Fragment Responds

Oobi lifted the glowing fragment.

The tiny piece vibrated with excitement.

A faint image appeared above it.

A flickering outline of Grampu.

He looked trapped behind a swirling wall of lost toys, notes, and memories.

"Help Grampu!" the vision cried.

Then it vanished.

Oobi's eyes filled with determination.

"Find Grampu now."

The simple words rang through the cave like a promise.

The Final Corridor

Ahead, the tunnel split open into a massive chamber.

A bright light flashed from within.

The scream came once more.

Closer now.

"OOBI!"

The walls shook.

The buffering symbols spun wildly.

Tommy's shadow flickered high above them, larger and more unstable than ever.

The Lost Place was near.

Very near.

The Boss unfolded the map.

Palmer steadied his clipboard.

Peter Policeman blew a sharp whistle.

Dazzie's rainbow stripes blazed.

Inka's snowflakes swirled.

Bertha stepped beside Oobi.

The entire team gathered behind him.

Oobi raised Grampu's fragment high above his hand.

"Find Grampu!"

The cry thundered through the Loading Zone.

And with Grampu's desperate screams guiding them through the darkness, the greatest hand-puppet rescue team ever assembled raced toward the heart of the Lost Place, where Grampu was alive, frightened, and waiting to be saved. ✋👴❄️🌈📋🕵️💻✨

Tab 27

Chapter Twenty-Four: Grampu in Chains

The chamber at the heart of the Lost Place was enormous.

Its ceiling disappeared into darkness, where floating toys, paper clips, buttons, and forgotten memories circled like silent planets. Ancient loading bars drifted across the walls. Giant buffering symbols spun slowly in the air.

And at the very center of the room—

Under a single cone of silver light—

Was Grampu.

Oobi stopped so suddenly that Dazzie nearly bounced off his hand.

"Grampu!"

Everyone gasped.

Even Sue forgot to straighten her file tab.

The Cage

Grampu was trapped inside a towering iron cage.

The bars stretched upward like black fingers.

Heavy chains wrapped around his wrist.

Attached to the chain, resting on the stone floor, was a huge metal ball scarred with scratches and rust.

It was nearly as large as Grampu himself.

Every time he tried to move, the ball scraped across the ground with a dreadful sound.

CLANG... SCRAAAAAPE...

Grampu looked exhausted.

His bandana was crooked.

His voice trembled.

But when he saw Oobi, his eyes filled with hope.

"OOBI!"

Oobi rushed forward until he stood at the bars.

"Grampu!"

Grampu reached through the cage and gently touched Oobi's hand.

"Oobi find Grampu."

Oobi nodded, tears in his eyes.

"Yes."

Inka and Bertha

Inka hurried to the cage, snowflakes swirling around her.

"Grampu!"

Grampu smiled weakly.

"Inka, my snow angel."

Inka's eyes shimmered.

"We came for you."

Bertha stepped up beside her, bandana fluttering.

"There you are, old friend."

Grampu chuckled despite the chains.

"Knew you'd show up."

Bertha wiped away a tear.

"You better believe it."

Sue and the Boss

Sue examined the cage with professional urgency.

"Industrial-grade bars. Reinforced locking mechanism. Extremely rude."

The Boss stepped beside her, calm and focused.

"We'll get him out."

Sue looked at him.

Her heart performed a triple backflip.

"Yes, sir."

Frankie whispered to Moppy, "She's about to faint."

Moppy whispered back, "Again."

Peter Policeman's Assessment

Peter Policeman took out his notebook.

"Victim located. Condition: chained but conscious."

Palmer added a checkbox to his clipboard.

RESCUE GRANDPA IMMEDIATELY.

Babyinator scanned the ball and chain.

"METAL BALL WEIGHT: VERY HEAVY."

James McFord folded his fingers.

"Good thing we brought eighty-seven people."

Grampu Explains

"How did this happen?" Uma asked.

Grampu looked upward toward the swirling shadows.

"Tommy's pattern grew stronger," he said. "It wanted to keep the things it collected."

The chain rattled as he lifted his wrist.

"So it locked Grampu up."

Oobi squeezed the bars.

"No more lock."

Grampu smiled warmly.

"Oobi always know what to say."

The Shadow Appears

Suddenly the chamber darkened.

The towering shape of Tommy's pattern formed above the cage.

A swirling giant made of toys, notes, and forgotten memories.

Its voice thundered through the room.

"...MINE..."

The chain on Grampu's wrist tightened.

Grampu winced.

Inka's snowflakes flared.

Bertha clenched her hand.

Oobi stepped forward.

"Not yours."

The shadow flickered.

Hesitated.

For the first time, it seemed unsure.

Family and Friends Unite

Everyone moved closer to the cage.

Sue.

The Boss.

Palmer.

Peter Policeman.

Moppy.

Uma.

Kako.

Dazzie.

Candy Cool.

Skittles McDove.

Connie Confused.

James McFord.

Babyinator.

Bertha.

Inka.

The Neighbor.

Jonathan.

BBJ and every single job variant.

Even Wyatt Walls and Lizzie.

A vast crowd of hands and one heroic rainbow sock stood together.

All focused on one goal.

Free Grampu.

Oobi held the glowing fragment high.

It blazed brighter than ever.

The missing piece flew from his hand and merged into Grampu's chest in a burst of golden light.

Grampu sat up straighter.

Stronger.

More complete.

But the chain still held.

The metal ball remained locked to his wrist.

The cage remained shut.

And Tommy's shadow loomed overhead.

Grampu reached through the bars and squeezed Oobi's hand.

"Oobi," he said softly.

"Yes?"

Grampu smiled.

"Knew you'd find Grampu."

Oobi smiled back, determination shining in his eyes.

"Now free Grampu."

The chamber trembled.

The shadow roared.

The chain rattled.

And the greatest rescue mission ever assembled prepared for the battle that would decide whether Grampu would finally come home. ⛓️👴❄️🌈📋🕵️✨

Tab 28

Chapter Twenty-Five: Tommy Did This

The iron cage groaned.

The heavy metal ball scraped across the stone floor.

CLANG... SCRAAAAAPE...

Grampu sat inside, his wrist chained, his eyes tired but determined.

Around him stood everyone who had traveled through basements, playgrounds, offices, backyards, caves, and the strange world beyond the neighborhood.

All hands.

All friends.

All focused on one question.

Who did this to Grampu?

The Question

Oobi gripped the cage bars.

"Who do this?"

Grampu looked at the towering shadow swirling above them.

The shape of toys, notes, and memories twisted in the darkness.

Its voice rumbled.

"...MINE..."

Grampu sighed.

"Tommy."

The name echoed through the chamber.

Tommy.

The boy from the notes.

The thrower of toys.

The creator of the pattern.

The one whose habits had grown into something far bigger than anyone imagined.

Oobi's eyes widened.

"Tommy did this?"

Grampu nodded slowly.

"Yes."

Grampu's Story

Everyone gathered closer.

Even Wyatt Walls leaned in.

Even Lizzie stopped counting shiny things.

Even Connie Confused remembered what was happening for almost ten consecutive seconds.

Grampu began.

"Long ago, Tommy was just a lonely little boy."

The shadow flickered.

"He liked throwing toys over the Neighbor's wall. Buttons. Cars. Notes. Anything he could find."

The Neighbor folded his fingers and muttered, "That tracks."

"At first," Grampu continued, "it seemed harmless."

The chain clinked as he lifted his wrist.

"But every time Tommy threw something away, he also threw away a little bit of attention."

Inka nodded softly.

"And unattended things become lost."

"Exactly," said Grampu.

Kako's eyes lit up.

"The pattern formed from repeated neglect."

Peter Policeman scribbled furiously.

"Cause established."

Tommy Changed

Grampu's voice grew sad.

"Tommy didn't mean to create a monster."

The shadow trembled.

"But he kept throwing things away. Toys. Notes. Memories. Feelings."

The chamber darkened.

"And eventually... Tommy himself was swallowed by the pattern."

The group gasped.

Jonathan pointed upward.

"So Tommy is inside it."

Grampu nodded.

"Yes."

The swirling shape overhead flickered with orange and blue sparks.

Not just a monster.

Not just a pattern.

But Tommy himself, trapped inside the very thing he created.

Oobi Understands

Oobi looked up at the shadow.

Then back at Grampu.

"Tommy lonely."

Grampu smiled warmly.

"Yes."

"Tommy scared."

"Yes."

"Tommy need help."

Grampu's eyes shone.

"Just like Grampu."

The shadow hesitated.

For the first time, its rumbling voice sounded less angry.

And more... uncertain.

Sue and the Boss

Sue adjusted her file tab.

"So this is not merely a criminal act."

The Boss nodded.

"It is a cry for attention."

Sue clasped her fingers.

"Sir, that is both emotionally intelligent and operationally precise."

Frankie whispered, "She is in way too deep."

Sue whispered back, "I regret nothing."

The Truth Revealed

Peter Policeman stepped forward.

"Case summary: Tommy created the pattern. The pattern trapped Tommy. The trapped Tommy imprisoned Grampu."

Palmer checked three boxes at once.

IDENTITY CONFIRMED.
MOTIVE UNDERSTOOD.
RESOLUTION PENDING.

Babyinator beeped.

"DIAGNOSTIC: SUBJECT REQUIRES FRIENDSHIP."

Skittles McDove pointed dramatically upward.

"Then we save two people tonight!"

Candy Cool nodded. "Exactly."

James McFord smirked.

"Guess the villain was a sad kid all along."

Connie Confused raised a finger.

"So... are we rescuing the monster?"

"Yes," everyone said.

"Oh good," she replied. "I thought we were in a cave."

Tommy Speaks

The giant shadow trembled.

Its glowing form shifted.

And from deep inside came a small voice.

A child's voice.

"...Nobody came back for Tommy..."

The words echoed through the chamber.

Soft.

Lonely.

Heartbreaking.

Oobi stepped forward.

"We come now."

The shadow flickered violently.

The toys and memories swirled.

The cage rattled.

The chain around Grampu's wrist loosened slightly.

Grampu smiled.

"Oobi always knows."

The Real Mission

Oobi turned to the enormous shadow overhead.

His tiny hand held steady.

"Find Tommy too."

The Grampu fragment blazed like a star.

Inka's snowflake charm sparkled.

Dazzie's rainbow stripes lit the chamber.

All around Oobi stood friends, family, coworkers, neighbors, robots, socks, and one truly astonishing number of BBJs.

Together.

Ready.

Not just to solve the mystery.

But to heal it.

Because Tommy had done this to Grampu.

But Tommy was also trapped inside the mystery.

And if they wanted to free Grampu, they would have to do something even harder.

They would have to save the one who caused it. 👴⛓️🧡🌈❄️📋✨

Tab 29

Chapter Twenty-Six: Oobi Reaches Tommy

The great chamber trembled like a giant heart trying to remember how to beat.

At the center of the room stood Oobi, small and steady, his tiny hand lifted toward the towering shadow overhead. Around him, all of his friends gathered in a wide circle.

Grampu sat in the broken iron cage, still chained to the heavy metal ball, but no longer alone.

Inka's snowflakes sparkled around him.

Bertha tightened her bandana.

Peter Policeman held his notebook ready.

Palmer gripped his clipboard.

Sue stood beside the Boss, trying very hard to focus on the mystery and only slightly focusing on how calm and handsome he looked in dramatic lighting.

Dazzie's rainbow stripes shimmered.

Babyinator beeped softly.

The Neighbor folded his fingers.

And above them all, Tommy's enormous shadow roared.

"...MINE!"

The voice shook the cavern.

Toys and papers spiraled through the air.

The Adobe Flash posters on the walls flickered like ancient digital ghosts.
Adobe Flash

But Oobi did not step back.

Oobi stepped forward.

"Tommy," he said gently.

The shadow froze.

No one had spoken to it like that before.

Not as a monster.

Not as a villain.

As a person.

Oobi lifted his hand higher.

"Tommy lonely."

The storm of toys slowed.

The giant shape trembled.

From deep within the swirling darkness came a small voice.

"...How do you know?"

Oobi looked up with wide, kind eyes.

"Oobi lonely before."

Uma squeezed Moppy's hand.

Kako nodded thoughtfully.

Even James McFord lowered his usual sarcasm for a moment.

Oobi continued.

"When Oobi scared, family help."

He pointed to Grampu.

"Grampu help."

He pointed to Uma and Kako.

"Uma help. Kako help."

He turned and pointed to the enormous crowd behind him.

"All help."

The shadow flickered wildly.

"...Tommy threw things away," the voice whispered.

"Because nobody wanted Tommy."

The words echoed through the chamber.

The room went silent.

Inka placed a gentle hand over her heart.

Bertha wiped away a tear.

The Neighbor's expression softened.

Tommy continued.

"I threw toys over the wall. I threw notes. I threw everything. If things disappeared... maybe Tommy could disappear too."

Oobi shook his head.

"No disappear."

The glowing Grampu fragment in Oobi's hand blazed brighter.

Oobi took one more step.

"Tommy come with Oobi."

The shadow trembled.

A tiny figure began to emerge from its center.

A small hand puppet boy with glowing orange eyes and a frightened face.

Tommy.

He looked around the chamber.

At Grampu.

At the Neighbor.

At all the friends Oobi had gathered.

At the hand still reaching toward him.

"...You came back?" Tommy asked.

Oobi smiled.

"Oobi here."

One by one, everyone stepped forward.

"We're here too," Uma said.

"We all came," Kako added.

"You are officially included," Sue declared.

Peter Policeman closed his notebook. "Case status: no longer alone."

Babyinator beeped. "FRIENDSHIP PROTOCOL ACTIVATED."

Dazzie twirled. "Group hug pending!"

Tommy burst into tears.

As the first tear touched the floor, the chain around Grampu's wrist loosened with a loud metallic click.

The shadow above them cracked like thunder.

For the first time in years, Tommy was no longer trapped inside the pattern.

And neither was anyone else.

Tab 30

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Sue and the Boss

As Tommy cried in Oobi's arms, the cavern changed.

The swirling storm of toys slowed to a gentle drift.

The heavy air softened.

The lights of the Adobe Flash posters flickered like stars at the end of a long buffering sequence.

In the warm glow, Sue stood beside the Boss.

For once, she had nothing to organize.

No forms to file.

No charts to prepare.

No emergency staplers to deploy.

Just a quiet moment.

The Boss turned to her.

"You did excellent work, Sue."

Sue's heart performed a gymnastics routine that would have earned perfect scores.

"I... thank you, sir."

The Boss smiled.

Not his usual tiny, almost-secret smile.

A real smile.

Warm and unmistakable.

"You never stopped believing we would solve this."

Sue clutched the blue file tab she had carried since the playground.

"Well... your leadership was extremely motivating."

Frankie snorted softly behind them.

The Mime Employee mimed fainting onto an invisible chaise lounge.

Sue ignored both with remarkable determination.

The Boss stepped closer.

"So was your courage."

Sue blinked.

"Mine?"

The Boss nodded.

"You care deeply about the people around you."

Sue's eyes widened.

Her voice became barely more than a whisper.

"I do."

The Boss looked directly at her.

"And that is why I admire you."

For a moment, Sue forgot what words were.

The cavern.

The mystery.

The dozens of hands and one rainbow sock.

Everything blurred into a soft, shimmering background.

"You... admire me?" she managed.

The Boss gave a small, sincere nod.

"Very much."

Sue's knees nearly submitted a resignation letter.

Before she could wobble, the Boss gently took her hand.

Their fingers fit together perfectly.

Sue looked down at their joined hands as though witnessing a miracle of office supply compatibility.

Frankie whispered, "This is happening."

Moppy squealed.

Candy Cool fanned Sue with a glittery scarf.

The Neighbor shouted, "ABOUT TIME!"

Sue laughed through happy tears.

"I thought I was the only one."

The Boss shook his head.

"Not at all."

For the first time since this impossible adventure began, Sue stopped worrying about what might happen next.

And simply held his hand.

Above them, the last pieces of Tommy's shadow continued to fade.

And in the middle of a cavern full of mysteries and memories, something wonderfully ordinary began.

Love.

Tab 31

Chapter Twenty-Eight: The Cage Shatters

Tommy stood beside Oobi, still sniffling.

"I'm sorry," he whispered to Grampu.

Grampu smiled from inside the cage.

"Everybody makes mistakes, kiddo."

The glowing Grampu fragment rose from Oobi's hand and floated toward the cage.

Inka's snowflake charm joined it.

Dazzie's rainbow light spiraled upward.

The combined magic swirled around the iron bars.

The cage began to shake.

The lock rattled.

The heavy chain around Grampu's wrist glowed.

Tommy stepped forward.

"I want to fix it."

Oobi nodded.

"Tommy help."

Tommy placed his hand against the bars.

Oobi placed his hand beside Tommy's.

Then Uma.

Kako.

Moppy.

Sue and the Boss, still holding hands.

Frankie.

Peter Policeman.

Palmer.

Bertha.

Inka.

The Neighbor.

Jonathan.

Candy Cool.

Skittles McDove.

Connie Confused, who whispered, "I think this is the right wall."

James McFord.

Babyinator.

BBJ and every single job variant.

Wyatt Walls and Lizzie.

Dazzie balanced dramatically on top.

All hands.

All together.

"Free Grampu!" Oobi cried.

The chamber exploded with light.

The cage cracked down the middle.

The lock burst apart.

The chain around Grampu's wrist snapped.

The heavy metal ball rolled away with a thunderous:

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!

The bars collapsed into harmless pieces.

Grampu was free.

Oobi leaped into his arms.

"Grampu!"

Grampu hugged him tightly.

"Oobi save Grampu!"

Uma and Kako joined the hug.

Inka wrapped her arms around Grampu.

Bertha embraced him from the other side.

Soon everyone was cheering, crying, laughing, and hugging.

Dazzie spun in glittering circles.

Skittles McDove launched an unauthorized dance number.

Babyinator announced, "MISSION STATUS: GRANDPA LIBERATED."

Peter Policeman wrote one final note:

Case solved.

Grampu looked around at the enormous crowd of friends who had crossed neighborhoods, offices, caves, and forgotten worlds to find him.

His eyes filled with tears.

"So many hands," he said softly.

Oobi smiled.

"All family."

And as the Lost Place sparkled around them, Grampu held Oobi close and knew he had been found not only by his grandson, but by every friend who refused to let him be lost.